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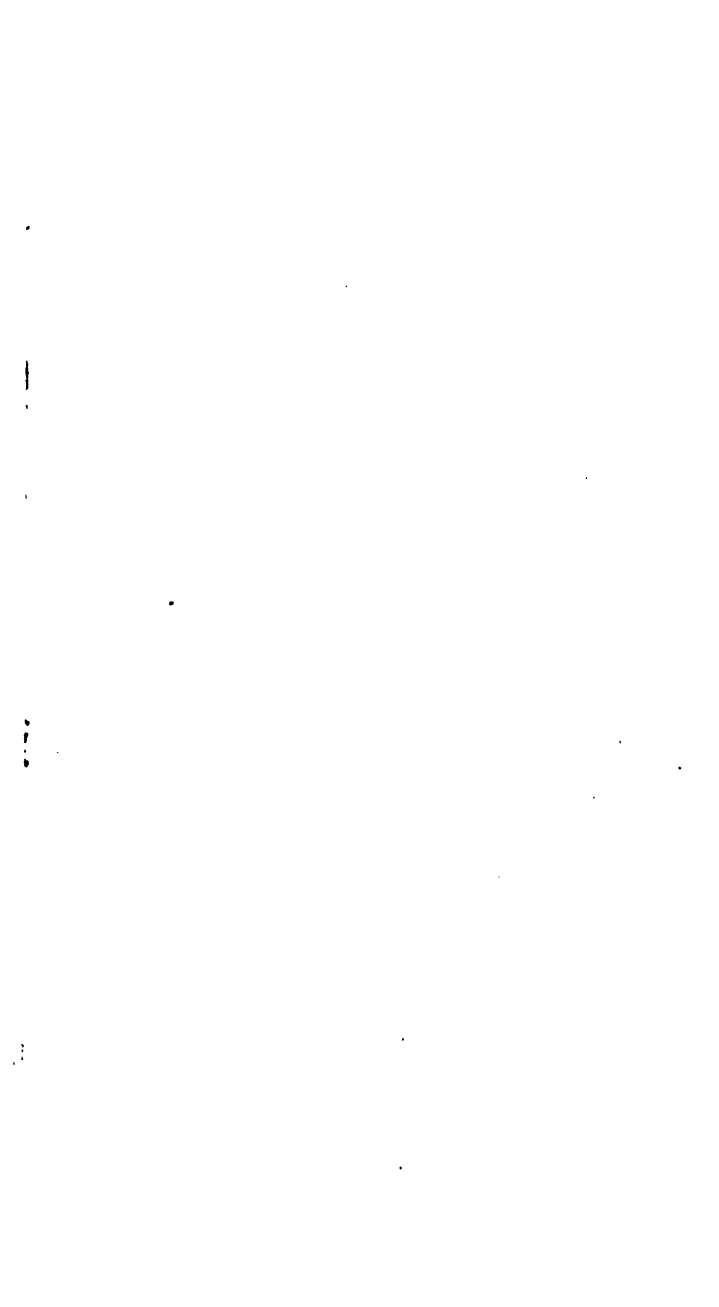
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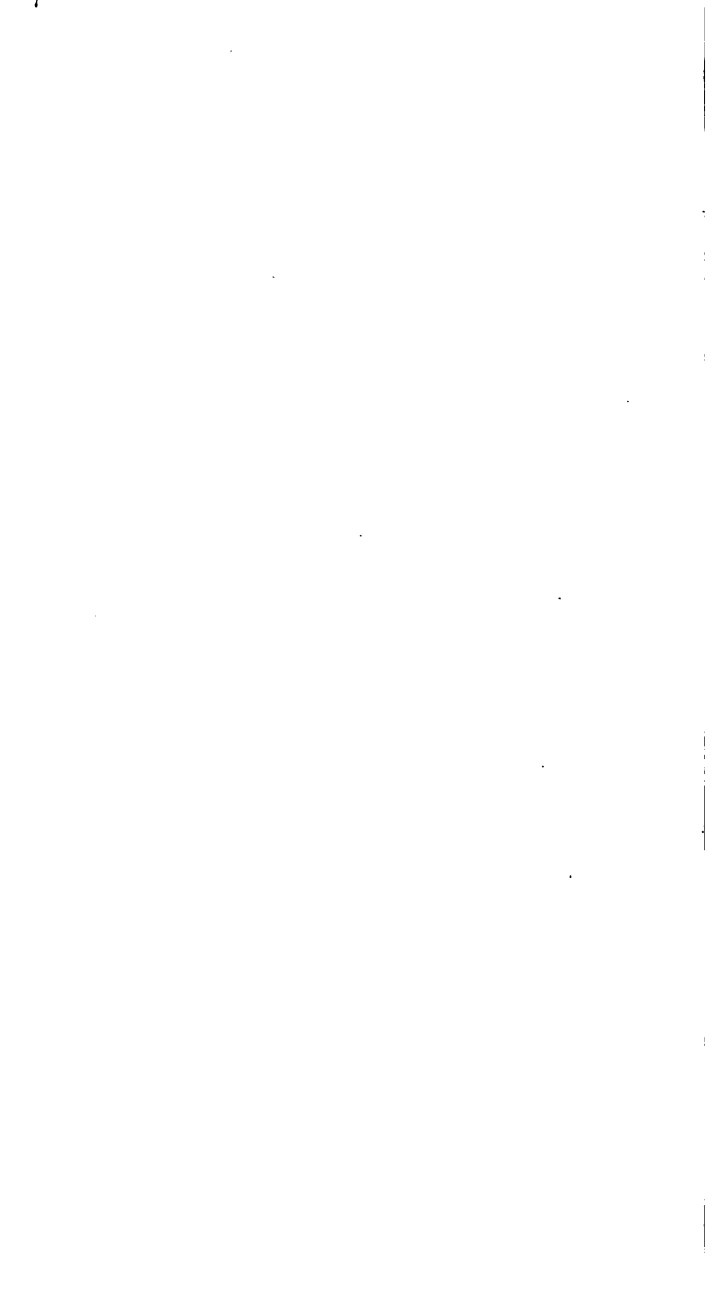
Lucy Osgood

OF MEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS









## **IMPRESSIONS OF OXFORD**



*Of this first edition one thousand  
copies have been printed.*





OXFORD

*from the*

*Cumnor Hills*



B. H. N.

# Some

BY

English version

by

M. C. WARRILOW

With drawings by

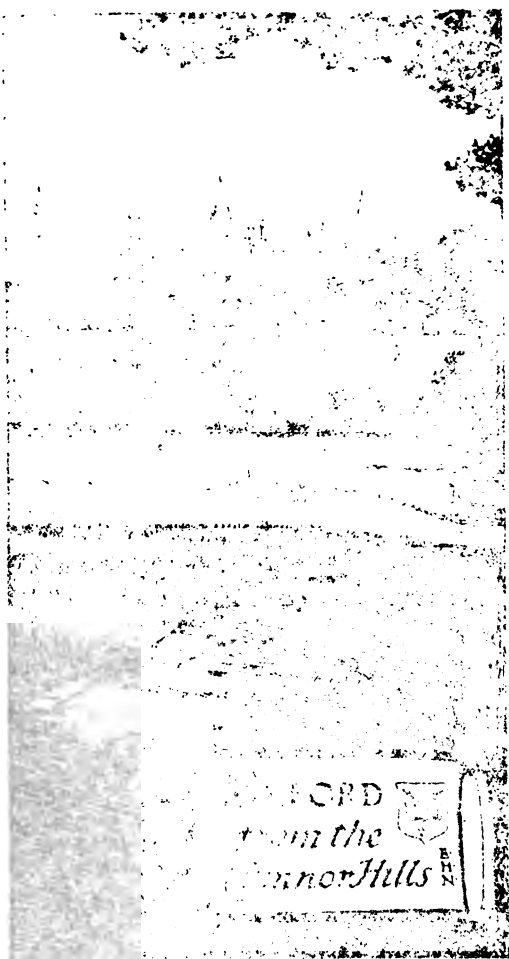
EDMUND H. NEW



LONDON

KINGS HOUSE, NORFOLK STREET, STRAND

1901



RECORD  
from the  
Hinner Hills



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# Some Impressions of Oxford

BY  
PAUL BOURGET

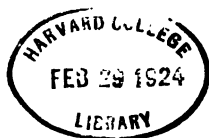
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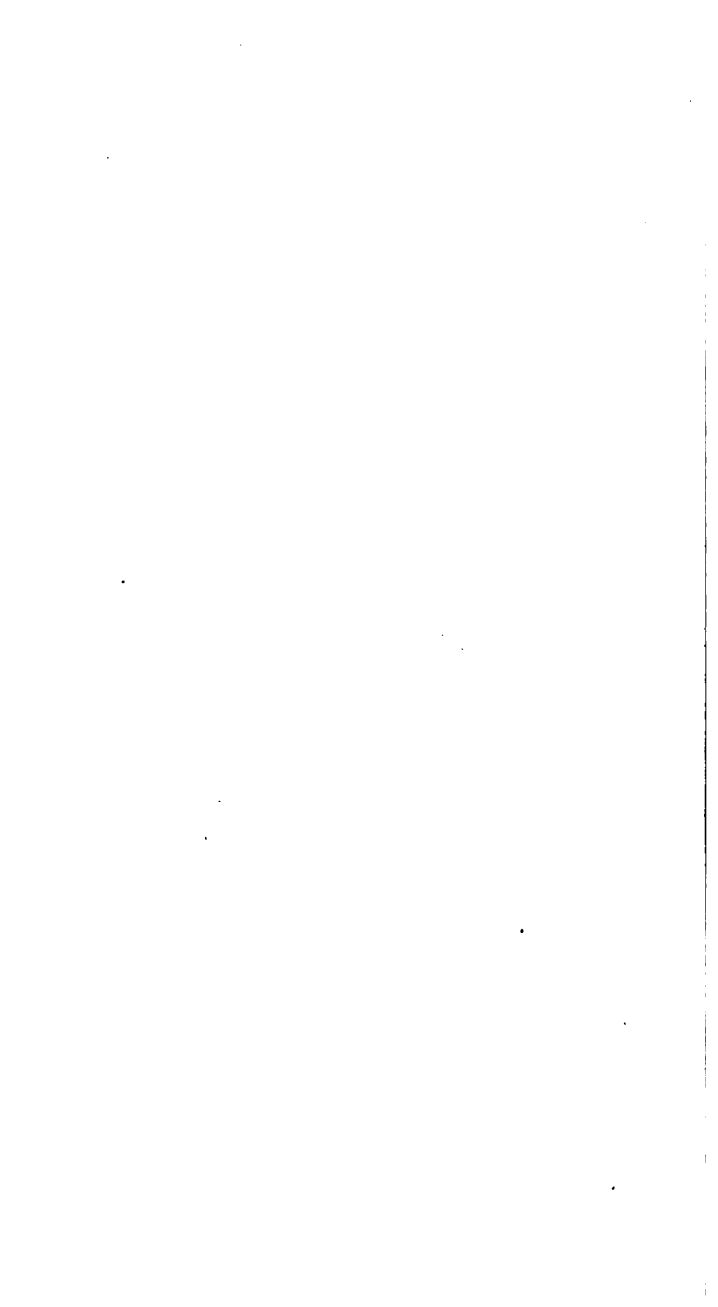
## LIST OF DRAWINGS

Oxford from the Cumnor hills

*Frontispiece*

Magdalen college tower . . . . .	II
In the Mob quad, Merton . . . . .	III
New college garden . . . . .	IV
On the Cherwell . . . . .	V
Pond in Worcester college garden	V
Oriel college and Merton college tower . . . . .	VI
The Bodleian library . . . . .	VII
The Union . . . . .	VIII
Cornmarket street and Tom tower	IX
St. Mary's church and High street	X
Shelley's rooms, University college	XI
The college barges . . . . .	XII
Sheldonian theatre . . . . .	XIII





# IMPRESSIONS OF OXFORD

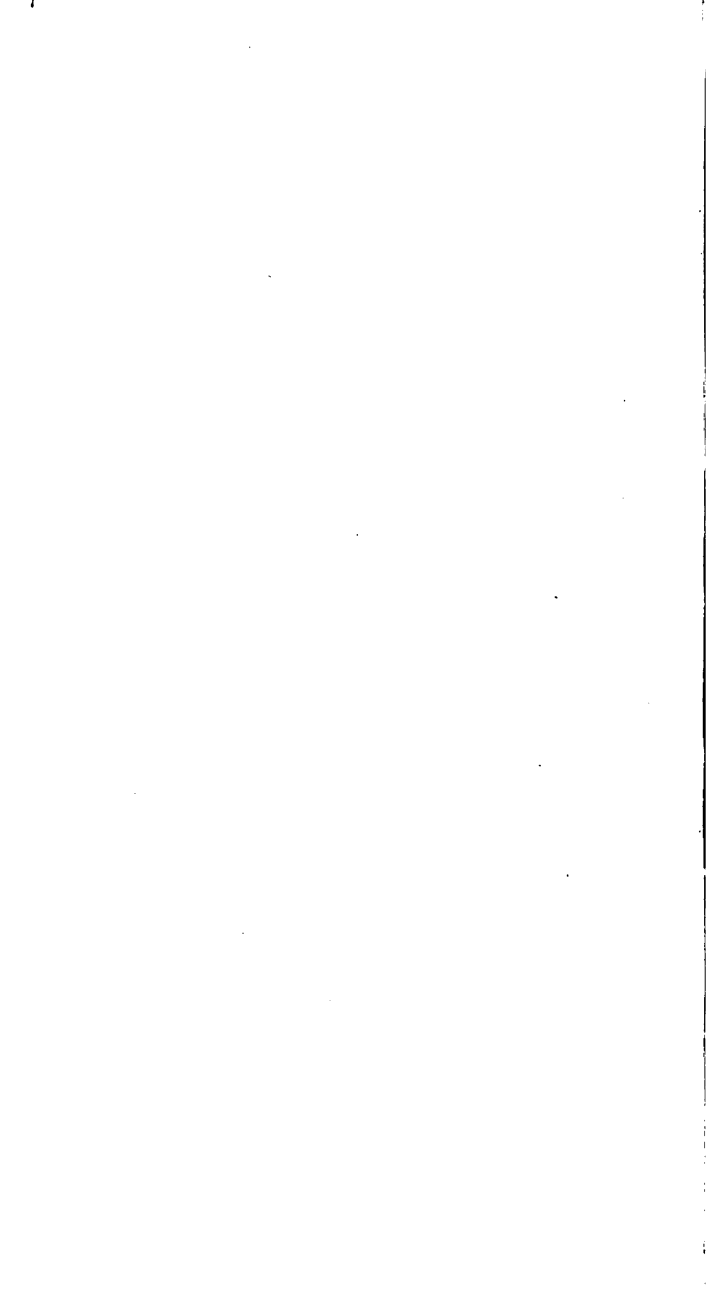
## TO A FRIEND

### I

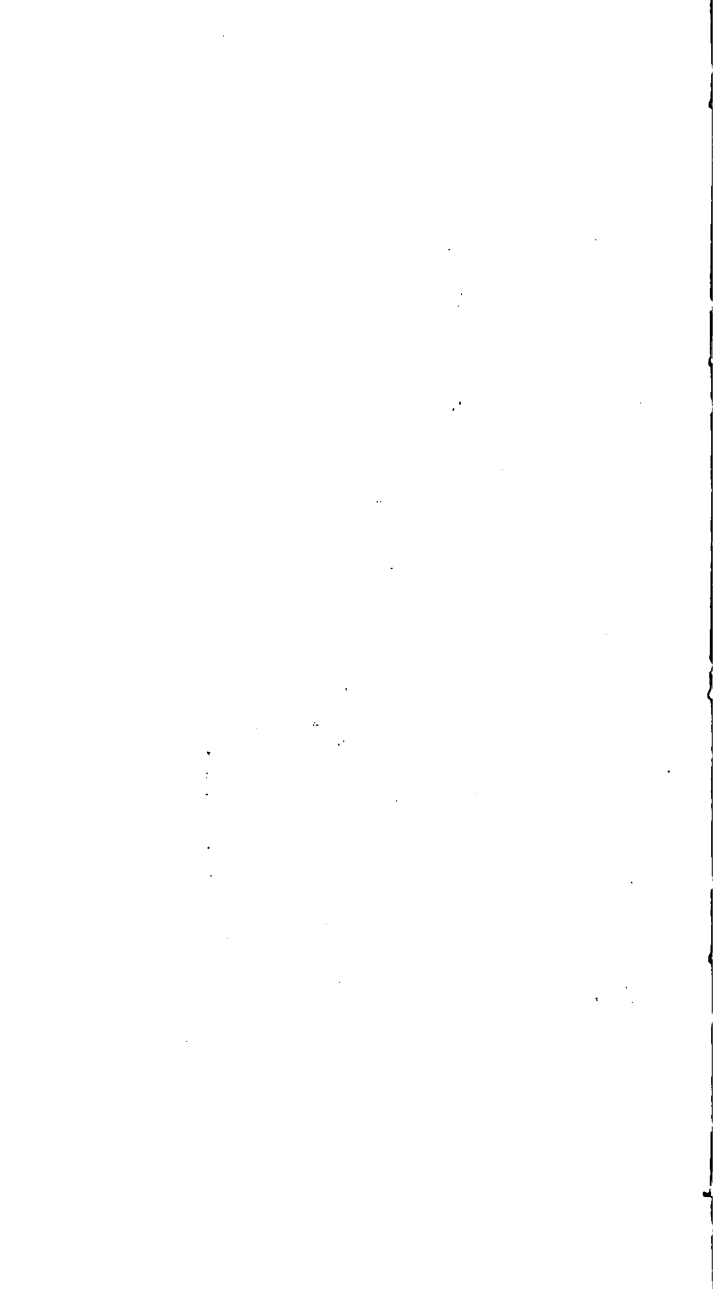
DO you remember, dear companion of past days so long passed already, do you remember our walks through the garden of the Luxemburg ten years ago? Happy time when, under the pretence of preparing for our examinations we talked of literature, amongst the marble statues in which lives again the remembrance of princesses long since gone! The statues themselves were very ordinary pieces of sculpture, but the names of the queens inscribed on the pedestals made us dream—vaguely. There floated before us on the afternoon air of the spring-time and autumn, the hope of a life so noble and so pure. Our great joy then was to discuss art, our worst grief the thought of the uncertainty of the truths of metaphysics and religion.

I

B



## **IMPRESSIONS OF OXFORD**



## II

PARIS is far away . . . but do you not know it as I do and have you not tasted it in all its exhilarating sharpness, this delight of one morning leaving behind all your ordinary life, its worries and pleasures, its likes and dislikes; this joy of climbing into the departing train, of leaning over the rail of the steamboat as it cleaves the green water, with only your thoughts as companions; this pleasure of parting with the woman you love, with her lightness and her smiles which wound; this happy flow of tender feeling towards her now she is far away, for this tenderness at least will not end in some cruel deception. Oh! this intoxication of liberty, half savage half home-longing, how I tasted it to the full those first days in Oxford! It was one of those delightful weeks of the month of May in England, with just those touches of half-veiled light which are needed to bring out the old Gothic buildings in all

their true beauty of outline. A shade of filmy haze hangs imprisoned between the interstices of the turrets, around the pointed arches of the mullioned windows, and on the jagged battlements.

The crumbling stones which the long cold winters of the north have clothed with a garment of moisture seem to awake in this quivering light of eternal youth, and it is a contrast of exquisite poetry when this awakening of a new spring is fulfilled in a medieval town which has remained as unchanged as ancient Oxford. Since Venice the sight of no other city has carried my thoughts so far away from the present. When once the suburbs are left behind we find only old buildings, domes and towers, belfreys and spires outlined against every point of the horizon. Some few streets run their entire length between high convent-like walls, and through the open gateways ornamented with pillars, one catches glimpses of a shady garden beyond: a green lawn, towering trees and boxes of flowers on the window ledges. Even the modern buildings which crowd between the old colleges and churches, these English houses which are so exactly alike from one end of the great island to the

other, with their guillotine windows and shrieking sashes, have here put on an indescribably picturesque air of oldness which harmonises well with the rest of the town. Here and there in the middle of some street and under the shadow of a church a burial ground is found, but so restful, so quiet, so peacefully solemn and pretty! Above the flat tomb stones the laburnums shake the golden rain of their flowers, the lilacs tremble beneath the weight of their branches laden with violet bunches, and the thick grass is studded with daisies. If the dead ones slumbering in this enclosure of silence and freshness could come back to life again, and mingle once more with the stream of passers-by who come and go around its gates, they would surely find but few outward changes in these nineteen colleges.

The magnificent tower of Magdalen from which it is the custom to greet with a hymn the awakening dawn on May morning, still looks down upon the river. The gilded brazen nose has never been torn from the door-way of Brasenose. The big clock familiarly known as 'Tom' still strikes the hour in Christ Church tower. Old Exeter still faces Lincoln, and the gardens of St John

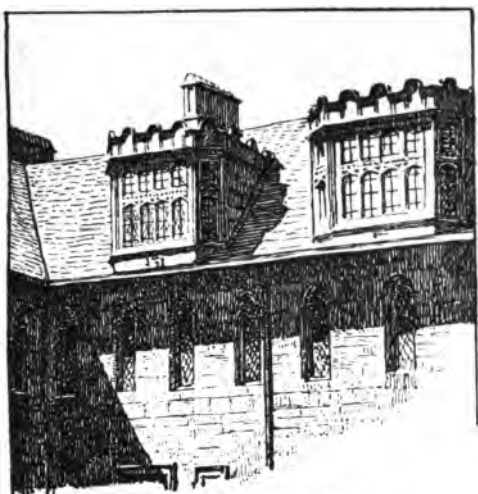


continue to wave in the sun of the newborn year the thousand leaves of their venerable trees. The poor departed, the acquitted ones of life, the 'defunct', as they were so eloquently called by the Latins would not need to ask their way on a pilgrimage to the place where their destiny was fulfilled. And you and I, my friend, how many changes have we not seen in those streets which served as a dumb framework to the sorrows and joys of our youth? How many new houses are there not to remind us that we are no longer young, we who have lived but so short a time! . . .

In these Oxford streets all closed in by Gothic buildings, the students pass along easily recognised, first by their age, then by their dress. Some are on their way to undergo an examination or to perform some official function. These wear the short gown which hangs from the shoulder, and on their heads a cap of a curious shape. Try and imagine a veritable helmet of black cloth fitting closely to the skull, above which spreads out a kind of square platform of the same colour. Others stroll leisurely along on their way to the club or to make some call. They carry with them that fault-

less and traditional bearing which is the ideal of every young Parisian of 1883 desirous of transforming himself into a 'gentleman'. Dressed in a greyish coloured suit, open coat of perfect fit, straight collar, pinned tie, round hat pulled well down over the eyes, so that not a single lock of hair may escape, feet at ease in laced boots with flat heels, they stride solidly along. In one hand they carry a pair of gloves of a reddish shade, in the other a stick which they hold about the middle, and at a certain distance from the body. This faultless and unimpeachable carriage is more than ever conspicuous when contrasted with the comfortable attire of those returning from tennis or boating. The latter are garbed in a blazer, either white or blue, on the front of which are embroidered the arms of their college. In flannel trousers too, with a soft hat and racquet in hand they walk along smoking a short briar pipe, the only indication that here is the Latin quarter of England. . . . Do you remember the outrageous eccentricities of dress indulged in by our comrades in the neighbourhood of the Panthéon? But that Paris where we saw our twenties, with its blue river, its soft sky, its

gay streets, the unconcern of its idlers, is it not the south already when compared with misty England, the easy-going sunny south with its freedom and informality reigning supreme in its good-natured joviality, the south ever bordering on the unconventional—has the north ever known such days as these when the mere fact of being alive is a delight?



In the  
*Mob Quad*  
Merton College



### III

**DID** you not frown a moment ago when you came across that word 'college'? It is so ugly in French and the train of thoughts it calls up so absolutely hateful! But then you were only a day scholar, so you know these abominable prisons but from the outside. For my part I dragged out ten long weary years of my childhood and youth in them—years which I would not live through again, no not one moment of them. I picture again the narrow courtyard where there was not space enough to play, the classroom where we were obliged to work elbow to elbow in silence and rigidity, the gloomy dormitory where we awoke to the sound of the drum; I experience again all the misery of that wretched barrack-like existence. But an Oxford college no more resembles this than our pale-faced schoolboy resembles the young athlete who has just passed on the opposite side of the road, lithe and vigorous

in his boating suit. An English college is somewhat difficult to describe, as it is a combination of the wealthy monastery with the aristocratic club, just as the English student embodies the sportsman, the humanist and the gentleman.

Do you remember that curious poem of Tennyson's, '*The princess*', a romantic story of a king's daughter who founds a university on the borders of her father's kingdom for herself and her favourite companions, pledged to virginity? And before the eyes of an English girl-reader there unfolds a complete picture of exquisite structures and cool lawns, so pleasing with their profusion of roses, that the most bewitching idyll may disclose itself in the midst, as it were, of its own scenery. Tennyson had only to draw a picture of one of these buildings in Oxford, where one may find twenty of the same order. Whether it be Merton college or Trinity, Worcester or Wadham, there are always the same old winding staircases of stone which twist round in the turrets or break off at the corners.

Each Oxonian has two large rooms, some having a vaulted roof, all with windows whose small panes are incased in bands of lead. Who could not dream

here of a Doctor Faust plunged in the abyss of his metaphysical difficulties? The furniture in these rooms is however quite modern, and oftentimes costly. There is usually a square table in the centre of the study which is used at one time for lunch at another for reading. A few arm chairs, a sofa, seats of all sorts, a book-case and a few engravings complete the picture of a comfortable batchelor abode. The bedroom is smaller. A camp bedstead and the indispensable 'tub' are its chief objects of interest. The student is master in his own rooms. The plate nailed to the door and upon which his name appears constitutes absolute possession of this corner of the huge hive. It is partly home, partly convent, but home with a few strict rules laid down such as never to be allowed to sleep out, and a convent where the liberty of coming and going, of choosing a time to work and a time to idle, is almost absolute.

The student is up a little before eight o'clock. Should he be very devotional he first attends service at chapel; then at about nine o'clock he will be found seated before a well-covered breakfast table in the 'hall', a spacious monastic-like



refectory, on whose walls hang portraits of the founders of the college, their most famous men or generous donors. A few of these canvases, hung during the lifetime or immediately on the death of those whose memory they perpetuate, date back more than a century. The silver pint mug from which the student drinks his beer or cider is more often than not the gift of some old member of the college. An *ex dono*, the arms with some old date below them remind the present possessor that he is only the recipient of a well-being and an affluence which date from before his time and which will outlive him. Even the smallest detail helps to heighten the impression of continuous and unceasing work which makes itself felt even through the old stone walls.

And what names they are, these of the old students! Five or six centuries of English glory hangs over the corridors of these laic cloisters. At University college one can still see Shelley's old rooms; at Worcester those of Thomas de Quincey, the opium eater and great essayist. The porter who takes the visitor round tells how forty years ago they cut down a poplar whose branches shut out all light from the window of

this room. At Merton college, which dates from 1264, studied the subtle Doctor Duns Scotus the enemy of Saint Thomas, the Scotist William Occam, the invincible doctor, and the reformer John Wyclif. One of the quadrangles of this college, so sombre in the midst of the other buildings which surround it, makes even the most unimaginative mind fly back to bygone times when the contention between the nominalists and realists was agitating all the schools of Europe. At Oriel Sir Walter Raleigh studied, that hero of so many extraordinary exploits, who found time during his imprisonment in the Tower to write in manuscript a history of the world. At Queen's college the mysterious and terrible Black Prince was educated; at New college, William Pitt; at Christ Church, the Duke of Wellington. In the grounds of Magdalen there is still the path where Addison took his walks; here he composed ingenious Latin verses on the peace of Ryswick and curious lines on his self-made marionettes. Pembroke is associated with the name of the famous Doctor Samuel Johnson, the red-hot tory who said of Rousseau, 'I should like to see him transported and

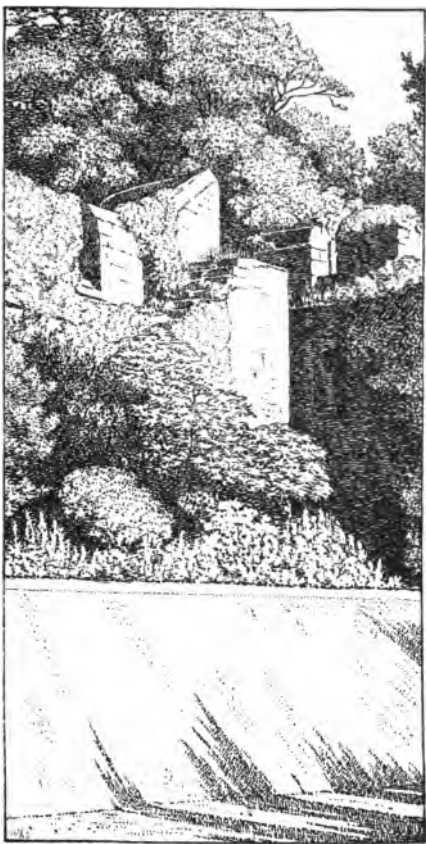
working in the plantations'. Other colleges are connected with the philosopher Hobbes, the theorist of despotism, and Dean Swift the sad and bitter scorner of human hopes. Every ancient English house is here represented, living still and influencing modern and contemporary England. Since the Romans, no people have practised the difficult art of self-perpetuation more than these. . . .

But the student has breakfasted. He works till about one o'clock in the afternoon, partakes of a hasty lunch consisting of a little cold meat and a compote of fruit, then he goes out boating or to tennis or cricket. About five o'clock the various sports are over, and the student retires to the club where he reads the papers. He wanders down High street and the Cornmarket—more generally known as the High and the Corn—or else attends evening service at one of the chapels; and should he choose either New college or Magdalen, which has each its training-school for choristers, he will hear beneath the old vaulted roofs sweet fresh voices singing passages of Schumann or Mendelssohn. At seven o'clock it is time to don once more the flowing gown and return to hall

to dine under the presidency of the heads of the college—the fellows or dons as they call them in Oxford—who are seated at a table on a platform at the extreme end of the large hall. Dinner being finished, the student, five times out of six, spends his evening at some ‘wine’, that is he joins his friends in their rooms or they come to him to drink port and sherry, smoke a pipe or a cigar, have some music or a game of cards. . . .

It is not, as you see, much like a monastery, this English college. The greatest possible care it seems is taken to shield the favoured young men of the wealthy classes from all commingling with women. With all their outward independence these Oxford students are guarded in the strictest possible way against the strongest temptation of youth. They think they are free, and so they are to row, to ride, to box and to empty their bottles of wine; as to the rest, no. And it is this latter license that our students pay most heed to. The evil genius of nature, to speak in the language of the pessimist, who unceasingly dangles bits of feminine drapery before the mind of every youth of twenty-two, is anxious to maintain his rights. It sometimes happens, so I am

told that the train from Oxford brings to the little town of Abingdon, which is not far away, a young man and woman who enter one of the hotels and order tea in a private room ; the young man is a virtuous student of some learned college, the young woman a grisette of the good University town. But the afternoon is short, the journey inconvenient, the girl self-seeking and of unrefined appearance. He must be back by midnight—and this is so much stolen from the enslaver, passion, who is ever ready to make any disguise serve his purpose of sapping our physical and mental strength—yes, any, both the most fascinating and the most unattractive, from the pretty face and figure, the quick wit and openwork stockings of a Parisienne, to the high colour, masculine form and expressionless eyes of an English girl. But the first of these disguises is more dangerous than the second.



NEW COLLEGE GARDEN EHN



#### IV

AND yet what places they are to which to escort a beautiful woman, and to sit at her feet, these spacious green college gardens, which are hardly used for anything but lawn-tennis parties, or lonely readings of Greek and Latin volumes. . . . She would smile, this woman with soft eyes, and one would feel sad and yet pleased to see this graceful being standing out against the background of old Gothic architecture—delightful symbol of life, eternally young and regenerated amidst the venerable relics of years that are gone for ever. . . . She would smile, this engaging child, and this smile would seem to mock the wisdom of the ancient doctors who grew old over their manuscripts in the silence of these retreats of labour. For these learned men shut up in their old studies did not learn more concerning the duplicity of human nature, and universal vanity than can be learned in a few moments by him who loves this pretty



woman, and who listens to her in the stillness of the evening, murmuring words as devoid of soul as her face is beautiful, as vain and empty as her eyes are deep, as trivial as her smile is tender. . . . How often in the twilight hour have I not called up just such an enchanting form in the gardens of New college, first of all, as I visited them before any of the others. These too are the oldest looking of any. As the members of the college undertook to keep in repair that part of the ramparts of the town which bordered on their grounds, the line of embattled walls is still standing here, its crenated openings shutting in the sky. The ivy quivers over these stones against which the balls and bullets have rained during the civil wars. Enormous oaks, elms, and firs border miniature avenues, and in the centre is a thick carpet of well-kept grass. It is altogether so fresh and so secluded, so pleasing to the eye, and so old ! Beneath these trees there seem to wander the unseen souls of so many things long dead, but which have not altogether departed ! Would it not have been a charming and yet amusing paradox to have carried on a sentimental conversation in these surroundings of olden days ?

The chimings of the clocks fill the air. How delightful to be with an other in this flowery solitude, to hear pretty lips telling of the lovers of a near friend, praising some new novel of a second rate literature, and relating the good fortune of some young dandy in whose company women rejoice to find their own level! . . . How delightful! . . . Unless it happen that the companion of this walk through the gardens of the old college be of the small number of those who are willing to keep silence and be looked at. Oh! a woman who would not speak, and who would be satisfied to embody in herself the imperishable, the divine beautiful, a woman who would be silent but who would love, and whose eyes would be flooded with tenderness and innocence as those of the gazelle seem human—this woman, the inimitable, how one would be free to love her, either in these gardens of New college or those of Magdalen! Light as a vision, she would glide beneath the arches of the cloisters, whose columns surround a green close studded with buttercups. The birds hopping on the grass would sing as she passed. The hideous heads sculptured on the gargoyles would follow her with their stony eyes. The tame deer

in the park would touch her hand lightly with their fawn-coloured coats. Along Addison's walk the venerable trees would fan her brow with the leaves of their branches. The blue periwinkles would look out from the shrubs. No other sound save that of a field-mouse swiftly crossing the path. The tiny brooklet encircling the park would flow by so gently! The sinking sun would illumine with its pale light the trunks of the old elms and the outline of her form, that of the dear silent one. There are hours in life and places in the world in which it is so easy to believe in happiness—so easy and so dangerous. In spite of every experience, every resolution, let but the breeze of the spring rustle the foliage, and our philosophy falls to earth, broken into a thousand pieces like a cup which a child lets fall. I think I interpreted this thought more poetically one day when I lingered, as I often did, dreaming in Worcester gardens, where, overhanging the water were only lilacs and laburnums, chestnuts and May trees all in full bloom. As these gardens are near the station the whistle of the departing train is heard at intervals, emphasising from outside this peaceful retreat, the cease-

less materializing of this pitiless life, and  
—may the shades of the fellows of the  
past century pardon me!—I went away  
with these verses ringing in my head :

Bird of my dream, thou that sittest and singest,  
This loveliest evening of summer, thy song;  
To yon May, with pink blooms all o'erladen,  
that clingest;  
Sad nightingale, cease ! I have heard thee too  
long.

Too well do I know them, those evenings en-  
chanted;  
Their shimmer of leafage green-gold 'gainst  
the blue !  
Those eves, all too many, let 'scape of me,  
haunted  
By the song of the love that saith never  
'adieu.'

Too deep have I mingled my soul hymenéal  
With the soul from dead flowers that long  
ago fell;  
Too deep gazed in eyes of the loved-one ideal,  
That thy voice, O my vision, from cloud  
could compel !

Cease, nightingale mine ! Be content to be  
bird  
Of the primrose ! perch not on the blossoms  
of May !  
Let rest evermore my worn heart, thou hast  
stirred  
To desire of the kiss that endureth alway.

There is no deathless kiss my friend any more than there is an eternal spring. These blossoms on the May tree will fade as has faded my dream, then will come the end of the tree itself, and after many years the crumbling of these buildings between whose walls this spacious green garden flourishes, and finally the dissolution of the race, whose spirit is manifested by these structures, whose language is spoken beneath these ancient domes. And after many many more years this earth which upholds these walls, this tree, these flowers, and us too, will submit to the destiny reserved for every thing as for every creature. Destitute of air, and frozen like the moon whose slender crescent is now outlined against the sky she will revolve, a void, silent globe through space. It is because of these certainties that the gloomy Schopenhauer was right, and before him Buddha, the freedom-giver, in counselling the restless soul a voluntary and decisive entry into the retreat of non-existence, amongst those who do not believe in 'Our Father which art in heaven.' The much-abused words, 'To what end?' are uttered in the sighing of the evening's waning to be exchanged each morning

for thoughts of new beginnings and hopes, and it will be thus until the last breath of the last man.

## V

IT is true too that she is strangely ingenious in charming away the most obdurate pessimism by the scintillation of her lights, and the delusive poetry of her appearances, this nature so dangerous at heart and so remorseless! . . . The evening after I had given myself up in the gardens of Worcester to my but too real sadness, you would have smiled to have seen me sitting in the stern of a light little boat, accompanied by one of my student friends, and skimming across the waters of the Isis—happy to be alive and to look at the landscape, as if I had never thought of philosophy in all my life. They give this mysterious name of Isis to the two arms of the Thames which encircle Oxford and to the river itself. The other branch is called the Cherwell—The river! This is the joy of the old university town and her pride. The young savage who lives, as Matthew Arnold says, in every young Englishman of twenty-five,



On the  
*Cherwell*

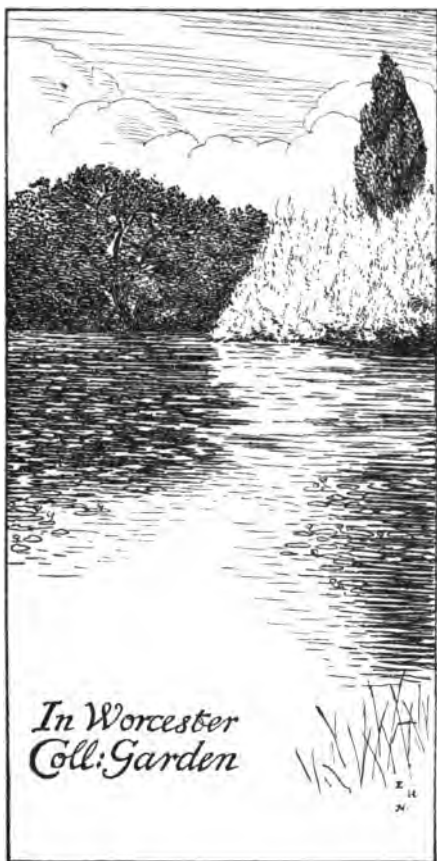
E.H.N.





finds in the manoeuvring of a boat hour after hour a means of exhausting, by sheer physical effort, this incomprehensible fervour of combat boiling in his veins. On the banks of the Isis then, and bordering on the wide meadows of Christ Church stretches out a long line of barges belonging to the different colleges. In the rooms fitted up below, the students taking part in a race can get ready, and on deck the crowd of onlookers can find places from which to watch these same races. All around are moored boats of every description, from the frail rob-roy, which one man paddles alone, to the long shell manned by eight rowers, without speaking of the sailing boats reserved for windy days. Agile and strong in their white blazers or sweaters clinging closely, the young men unfasten one of these boats. Each one bears the arms of its college. Here are the three stags of Jesus, the eagle of Christ Church, the open hand of Worcester. Before taking their oars, some of the men plunge into the water, and this refreshment enables them to row a longer distance without being inconvenienced by the heat. It is a pretty sight to see this river on a sunny afternoon in spring. It flows full

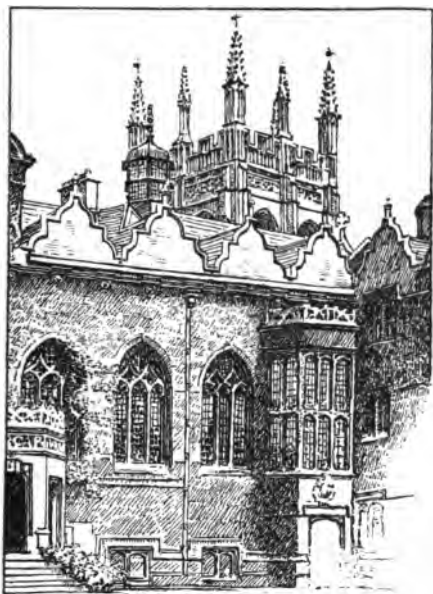
and solemn at the foot of broad fields yellow with buttercups. On the left Oxford with its gothic edifices pierces the pale blue sky, always somewhat overcast with a few clouds. The exquisite tower of Magdalen, Christ Church tower and the Radcliffe Camera rise high above the other buildings, and the line of hills surrounding the town shows up blue in the distance. On the river there is a ceaseless coming and going of small craft. The sails of the yachts fill easily, the blades of the paddles make the tiny barks fly swiftly along. The eight oars of the larger boats rise and fall with an almost machine-like regularity. Sometimes a woman dressed in white sits in the stern steering. My companion points out to me on the right a new barge which is used as a summer residence by some eccentric Englishman and his family; and above all this life on the river, the luminosity of the air gives to the water almost the brightness of a human smile. And so she glides along this friendly and buoyant Thames as far as Iffley church, an old Norman chapel which rises on a height between a churchyard bright with roses, and a vicarage surrounded by its gardens—secluded and saintly retreat





whence it seems that life ought to appear bright, happy and restful as a landscape ! ... But charming as is the Thames lengthened by the junction of the Isis and the Cherwell, the Cherwell, the smaller of the two arms of the river seemed to me still more delightful. It winds, narrow and shallow, through the meadows of Christ Church after passing round Magdalen park. The pale foliage of the willows rustles above its tortuous sleepy waters. There are neither sailing nor racing boats here, only light craft filled with two friends or a lonely rower. Here and there, and in places where the branches of the trees bend over and form a kind of natural cradle, one of these boats is moored. Almost motionless and lying in the bottom of it, a student turns over the leaves of his book. Here he remains several hours glancing alternately at the page before him, the waving grass, the blue sky or the river. The open air is as necessary to this strong frame as it is to plants or roving animals, and is there not in this Oxford student something of the physical beauty of those young Greeks whose harmonious strength we admire, represented in the marble statues in the Louvre ? The

speaking figures of the athletes, which can be seen in old museums, seem more worthy of admiration when one has been here and realized from one's own observations how the union of violent physical exercise with intellectual culture is productive of splendid manhood. With us, Frenchmen of the second half of the century, the young tree of thought too often springs up in a soil which is not rich enough, so that the roots shiver the vase, and the young tree fades from the very excess of its own development. This mystic tree whose every leaf is an idea grows here in good soil, and more than one amongst these rowers and students could say with the sage of old : ' All is in harmony with me, O Nature, that is in harmony with thee! . . . ' For how many hours have these sublime words of the greatest Roman emperor been true with us ?



*A corner of  
Oriel Coll:*





## VI

I KNOW, my friend, that in the category of tastes which we have in common I must enumerate this strange pleasure of diffusing our ego into everything—a pleasure so singular that the French language has no one expression to sum it up and define it. You love as I do to let yourself be carried away by the life pouring from some bit of landscape so far as to lose for a few moments the exact consciousness of your own individual being.

During these moments of vapoury dreaming, it is as if the soul leaves the body, and becomes running water with the river, a sleepy wavelet on the lake, quivering foliage on the branches of the trees, spring perfume with the aroma of the flowers, vibrating light with the rays of the sun.

Sometimes this loss, as it were, of our own personality takes place in connection,

not only with things, but also with our fellow men, and it is then an entirely different existence from our own which we espouse all in a moment in its minutest details, by some inner hallucination of extraordinary swiftness. The coolness of the cloister as we walk leisurely through is sufficient to clothe us in thought in the coarse habit of a monk, and with it his life, his feelings and even his thoughts. One becomes a peasant, patient, artful, frugal, and inchoate, just by the sight, on a road-side in Normandy, of the living room of a farm, clean and bright, with its carefully-polished wood furniture, its large fire-place where the soup is preparing in an enormous pot.

It is to this kind of delusion I was a prey in Oxford, not once but ten times a day, especially when I found myself seated at the table of the dons of some college, these amiable and learned fellows. I was almost surprised not to feel their long black gown falling from my shoulders and their square cap fixed on my head. And I fell into what has been the snare, I should imagine, of all dreamers since there has been a world of facts and a world of ideas: I built up the story of

my own destiny. I collected in a bundle all the scattered information that I had been able to find relating to the life of the masters of Oxford, I imagined myself to be one of them, and a delusion was created which I will try to describe to you.

I saw myself in about my twentieth year coming up for the first time—a freshman as they say—to this venerable Oxford, and at once became delighted with the town. This country of letters surrounded me with an atmosphere of learned reveries, and my four years of study, at the end of which I was to take my M.A. degree, passed like a single day. Hardly did I realize the existence of a modern world wrapped as I was in the dust of old books. On the other hand, bent over my square table by the side of my glowing coal fire on winter nights, I could picture clearly the Diana of pagan legends bathing her beautiful form in the cool water of the stream, and the eyes of Acteon shining through the foliage. Homer's verses brought to my ears the song of the treacherous and alluring sirens. With Virgil's Dido I wandered along the path of guilty lovers. . . . All these tales of ancient litera-

ture were to me realities, amongst which I moved as amongst the trees of the meadows of my college. . . .

The days run their course. I become a well-known humanist. I write many lines in Greek for my own amusement, and it is in Greek too that I express my feelings towards the sister of one of my friends. This young girl having come to our dear Oxford on a visit to her brother, I invited them both to an interminable lunch, which ended in my falling in love with her. Seated at the end of this same table where I am now writing, and with my back turned to the window, I could see her laughing quietly. Nemesis, the enemy of mortal's happiness, decreed that six months later she should marry another and leave for India. I consoled myself by translating my grief into Sapphic strophes of the most touching order, besides which I fell in love at the same time with the elegies of Catullus, of which I promised myself that I would give a definite edition.

My student days are over. I have gained a fellowship in a college founded by King Edward II. to the one end that prayers should be said regularly for the repose of the souls of the knights killed

in an expedition against Scotland. To repeat prayers was rather a difficult task for me, as I had arrived at that stage in my reflections when I no longer believed in a personal God, and had strong doubts as to the immortality of the human soul. My fellowship is worth about £280 a year for the rest of my life. With this and the sum I make by my research work I am assured of absolute independence. I have three delightful rooms in my college. The largest filled to overflowing with books which have come to me from all parts of Europe is my study. Next to this is my drawing room, then my bed room. Whilst I am studying, seated in my favourite arm-chair, on the arm of which is fixed a small revolving desk, I have only to raise my eyes to see through my pointed window, convent-like surroundings whose very silence is a pleasure to me. There is the long narrow quadrangle. On the left is outlined the chapel. A square tower rises above one angle ornamented with statues and hollowed at the foot by a wide staircase, the upper steps of which are lost in deep shadow. The other buildings of this quadrangle are occupied by the students' rooms. There are flower boxes at every

window and the upper wall is distinctly notched.

I gaze at the old stones and begin to think of the fellow who occupied these rooms before me. He passed fifty years of his life here. I go back in thought, and beguile the time by counting the number of people who have enjoyed my fellowship since the founding of the college. Here in 1326 the king installed a provost—this is the name given to our head—and ten fellows. Between those first ten fellows and those of to-day there has not been room for more than sixteen nominations. Sixteen persons only have grown old in this peaceful corner of which chance has made me master.

It is in this study of mine and amongst my books that I am content to pass my days during my residence in Oxford, and I am often in residence although my income is remitted to me wherever I may be. But the air of Oxford is to me like my native air, and when anywhere else I feel away from home. At six o'clock I don once more my evening suit, as if I were going to dine at the club, and throwing over it my little black gown I put on my square cap and take my seat

with the other fellows of the college at our table raised on a platform at the further end of the hall.

Dinner over we retire to our own common room to take our dessert and drink our wine. Ceremoniously from hand to hand are passed the decanters which contain the clear sherry, the red claret, and the dark port. From the wide bay window one looks down upon a green carpet surrounded by lofty trees. On a beautiful spring evening this makes a green background of wonderful intensity, which the long dying rays of the sinking sun light up silently. Scientific discussions follow one another around me, interspersed with anecdotes about Oxford life. An agreeable warmth caused by the port spreads itself over my face with that peculiar purple hue which finally becomes the usual colour of many Englishmen, and I lead my friends to my drawing-room where we smoke and drink tea.

This is not a very large room, but how comfortably it is furnished and what a delightful place it is to talk in! A few engravings hang on the walls. Here, in a carefully locked bookcase I have a collection of choice books. My delight is to give myself up in these familiar



surroundings to the joys of purely intellectual conversation. Three or four of us—not more—sit here thinking aloud and disclosing the depths and sub-depths of our opinions on problems of the greatest moment to us. One of us is a Berkeleyen, who does not believe in the existence of matter. Another is a positivist to whom metaphysical questions seem nonsense, which opinion however does not prevent his never talking of anything else. A third is an æsthetic of remarkable discernment who expounds international works of art by a profound philosophy. As for myself, my universal interest in things continues, although my beloved Catullus has not ceased to be my favourite author. I have almost finished my revision of the text of his poems with a wonderful ingenuity. We discuss pell-mell the unattainable and Lesbie, Leonardo da Vinci and politics, and when our party breaks up I can hardly realize that I have ever taken delight in any other delusions. I recall the smile of one who is now in India, and say to myself, repeating no doubt some famous saying, that she might have had much hair and few ideas, she might have meddled with my papers, interfered with

my work, busied herself with my concerns . . . in short, I feel supremely happy in the thought that my good genius has shielded me from this danger, and that my joyous life will continue to my last hour. And then the *publicus orator* will pronounce in fine Latin prose from the rostrum my funeral eulogium on Commemoration day. . . .

‘Have you read Schopenhauer?’ I asked a fellow, one of my friends, whose whole life much as I have told it you, I had just been living through in imagination, without his ever suspecting it.

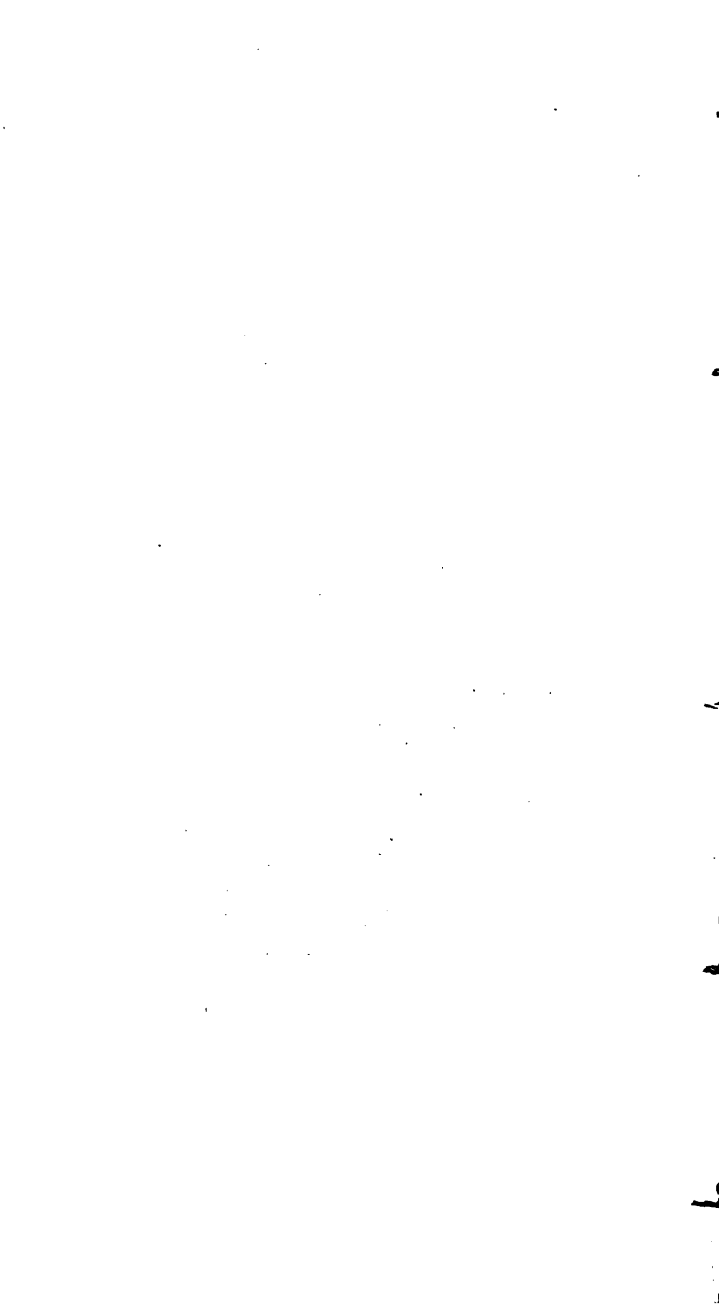
‘What would be the good of it?’ he replied with a bitter smile: ‘it is all read! . . .’ meaning by that that his own experience had been sufficient to show him the world as a wretchedly constructed machine, and the fact of living a disease difficult to bear.

‘We must be contented with our lot’, one of the simple examples in our Latin grammar used to tell us.

## VII

CONTENTED with our lot ! . . . words easily spoken ; but this theory of being contented with what we have is not an easy one to put into practice, witness to it the unsatisfied restlessness of centuries of our poor human race. Had nations and individuals been contented with their lot, invasions, wars, religions, literatures, crimes, vices, opium, alcohol, diversions, fine arts would never have been heard of. All history is but one great and painful struggle engaged in by generation after generation with precisely one end in view, that of changing that lot. 'To be otherwise' is the motto of individuals and races. A motto for ever false, for it is a law of our nature that desire wraps things and people in a veil of poetry which vanishes with possession. Knowing this commonplace truth our wisest plan would be to learn to know life, without giving ourselves up to it, to feel without allowing our feelings to engulf us, to





flirt with our dreams without espousing them. The woman we catch a glimpse of and of whom we say, we could have loved her, the landscape we see in passing and whose influence we think would have softened our sorrow, could we know anything better on this earth where every realization of a wish means suffering? For this reason the town of Oxford will hold a special place in my memory; all my life I shall love its old streets because I have wandered through them without any afterthought of living there. I shall love its old walls because I have only looked at them as backgrounds to my dreams and imaginings. No doubt it is in this way we should always travel, for in reality it is a vain idea to pretend to understand minds and manners foreign to us or to fathom their meanings; we only sadden our conception of them. In this delightful town amongst the most fertile spots in half romantic, half psychological suggestions, I rank first the library of the Bodleian, so called from the name of its founder Sir Thomas Bodley, who lived at the end of the sixteenth century. This part of the building is divided into a series of small studies opening into the centre. The student is shut into one of

these with his folios before him, a desk of a convenient height for taking notes, and from the window he can look down into the inner quadrangle of the old building. All the partitions and screens of this wonderful room are of wood carved in the Later Renaissance style. A religious silence fills the place. The somewhat clouded light of an English afternoon wanes softly here. It is the poetry of study itself become as it were present and tangible. How I used to delight to shut myself up in one of these study prisons, and look through the old editions of English poets contemporary with Shakespeare, in search of love sonnets! In turning over the yellow pages I experienced something of that almost sensual sadness which one feels when looking at the portrait of one of those beautiful women of bygone times.

‘But where are the snows of other days?’ . . . I leaned my elbow on the precious volume and thought to myself that all these studies were just as they now are, in the life-time of some of these very poets. Perhaps then too some young man consecrated by his family to the life of a clergyman, read in secret this very book in this self-same study instead

of poring over the pages of the theological works allotted to him. The hours pass on . . . what were they doing then, those from whom we were one day to be born, our forefathers—for nobles or commoners we all have their blood running in our veins. To think that only two hundred and fifty years ago there were in this world several living beings who in some way or another had something to do with our coming into life. They went, came, thought, felt, and in these goings and comings, thoughts and feelings some fragment, smaller or greater, lives again in us. Awful mystery to think that the woof from which our being is formed should have been woven at a time so far distant from us and yet how near—a time when, in a certain sense, we existed already, since the elements which make up our being were all existent then, and identical with that which they are to-day! The thought which perplexes me at this moment had its birth perhaps in the mind of one of my unknown ancestors, surrounded by a landscape which I shall never see and yet which influences me. So too the smiles of the woman we love have already played around lips now perished, the glances she tosses to us and which capti-



vate us have already passed the portals of orbs now extinct. The emotions which urge her towards us, have already impelled hearts now still. Death lies behind our whole living being of to-day. All our passions and our happiness are as garments which others have worn before us. We shall use them but a few days to pass them on to others, and thus for ever until the fulfilment of time. And when one so analyses the beginnings of life, how can one help but conclude that love, this god immortalized by every poet, is the most awful agent of injustice it is possible to conceive of? By the enchantment of a few seconds we become, with all the lightheartedness in the world, accomplices in this fearful transmission, not only of all our vices, but of those too of our forefathers which are latent in us, for it is a well-known fact that hereditary tendencies pass over two or three centuries and then bring to light characters thought to have long disappeared. Oh! those delightful dialogues blended with soft kisses and burning sighs which are whispered through every hour of the day and night in lawful and forbidden meetings! How pitiful it seems that these joys, these tendernesses, and this fervour should have as a final

result the inflicting on other beings, to whom these enraptured executioners who love each other never give a thought, the burden of all the afflictions, all the weaknesses, all the sorrows too of many generations. . . . But to all this, to-day as yesterday the spiteful genius of nature replies with his enchanter's song, aided by the music of the streams, the glittering of the stars, the scented breath of the flowers, the soothing whispers of the summer nights. . . . Life is short, and she whom thou desirest is beautiful, lose thyself. Life is short, and he who beckons thee is young, surrender thyself—and the die is cast which consists in passing on from father to son, suffering, vice, death, as a conjurer fills his goblets with wine. . . . My philosophy had carried me so far when the librarian touched me gently on the shoulder. 'It is four o'clock', he said, 'the library is closing. . . .'

## VIII

**THERE** are libraries in all countries, and in every country too the boy Cupid looks well to his work of distributing passing pleasures and lasting miseries. You then, my friend, will understand that it was not worth while to come to Oxford to discover such common-place truths as those of which I have just constituted myself the interpreter ; I who am so anxious to find out others. Yet who can tell if plunging thus into pessimism does not make our minds more disposed to taste of life. It then appears to us, this life either turbulent or peaceful, like a theatrical representation in which we assist without playing too prominent a part, and everything interests us because nothing stirs us very deeply—happy state which lasts so short a time!

On waking from the dreams which I have just been picturing to you, and after leaving the Bodleian, I took a pleasant stroll down the Cornmarket, and from there turned into a narrow street at the



The Union



end of which rises a modern building, but of gothic style, whose entrance might be that of an orthodox church or a bank. It is the usual rendezvous of unemployed students, the club of the Union, of which every Oxford man may become a member on the payment of an entrance fee of one pound and a rate of twenty-five shillings. This is an absolutely English institution, and one which has no analogy in France. In this society for young men, as extensive as a mansion, five or six rooms are used for different kinds of lectures. There are the newspaper rooms, where the daily papers, weekly periodicals, monthly magazines, and foreign reviews may be read. A fine library, containing a collection of old and modern books sufficient to satisfy the most starving literary appetites. There is the telegraph booth where the news of the United Kingdom and the world is posted, the writing room, the smoking room, the coffee room where the students may find, according to the season, either coffee or ices, soda-water or lemonade; the debating hall where every Thursday public discussions are carried on with the necessary etiquette observed at a parliamentary sitting: president, secretaries, and final vote. The centre

of this group of buildings in which all these rooms are found, is laid out as a garden with tall trees and a well-kept lawn. . . . Do you remember the cafés of the Latin Quarter where the literary clubs gave their entertainments in our day and do so still ?

Poor gloomy cafés ! They came to my mind as I walked through the rooms of this Oxford club, and I saw again the anxious faces of the young men with whom I talked æsthetics in those far-off days. Somewhere at the back of the cafés, future doctors and lawyers who had come up from some provincial town and still retained their native accent, were playing at cards ceaselessly. ' Five cards. . . . What are they worth ? . . . The point. . . . Fourteen from the knave. . . . Worth nothing. . . . ' These formula of the traditional picquet reached us solemn and slow ; a few papers were lying on the marble tables, leaflets of the boulevard or pamphlets of fiery controversy. This poverty of scenery did not prevent our having an abundance of general ideas, superior to those of the average Oxford student. But how these latter surpass us in the art of installing their work and their comfort ! What wealth here and of

every kind! What abundance of documents for the man who is desirous of following English and European movements in the world of facts or ideas! How each student who belongs to this society feels himself at home, and not in a suspected smoking-house, amongst his equals and not in the midst of a band of idlers and nondescripts. Coming from the old college where everything points to the firm and broad existence of a powerful corporation he finds here too the same atmosphere of perfected knowledge. There is not a detail either in these colleges or in this club which does not tend to strengthen in him the feeling of personal dignity, not a place where he does not find himself treated as a gentleman, and in consequence obliged to act as a gentleman.

The most superficial observer may estimate the amount of influence of this *ensemble* of conditions, only by assisting at one of the Thursday evening debates, of which I have already spoken. On the walls of the debating hall one may see the portraits of those who have been presidents of the society during the time of their studies. Some of these old members of the Union have become famous men in



politics, amongst others Mr Gladstone. The tie which unites the occupation of early youth with the triumph of ripened years is made visible by this example better than by all the declamations of the moralists. The evening on which I heard one of these debates, the subject under discussion was the policy of the Government in Ireland. Debates of this kind are so familiar to the members of the University that even their tutors encourage them to undertake them. Have I not seen posted at the entrance to Balliol this subject for composition: 'Discuss this thought of Hume, that the representative system comprises two houses: a higher and a lower?' The young men rise one after another and speak from their places. Each one on going out writes his vote in a book kept for that purpose.

As even in serious Oxford the *naïveté* common to youth must find vent and have its way, to the discussion on Ireland there succeed a number of schoolboy disputes. One of the members proposes erecting a rostrum for the speaker above the president's table in order to add to the dignity of the debates. Another complains of a dearth of ices in the coffee room. These trivial incidents serve to show the inde-

pendence of these young men, who rule liberally in a house of which they are the masters. Boyishness is absent, as is also that pedantic and technical gravity of our lawyers' conferences. There is a frank familiarity of speech, spontaneous laughter which bespeaks youth and at the same time an attention to public business which reveals the mind of the politician, and one recognizes one of the governing ideas of an Oxford education, the care of training recruits to become members of parliament for the country.

I listen to these future speakers of the house of commons, and involuntarily the old comparison between the state and the navy comes back to my mind. It seems to me that this navy is to-day advancing with rapid strides and that the working of it is becoming more and more scientific, as its construction is more and more complicated. How many human beings must be taught and sacrificed so that the steam-boat may advance! It does not suffice that a colony of stokers should pant for breath in the stoke-hole before the furnaces. How many days of struggle and how many workmen stand for the fashioning and the adjustment of those pieces of steel which put the wheels in

motion? And all this work has for its final result the securing of the comfort of a few passengers who yawn wearily on the bridge, symbols of wealth which withers from *ennui* in the wretchedness of its idleness. The most favoured are those who can lean over the rail and watch the long folds of the rolling surge, the infinite expanse of sky, and the grandeur of the horizon. But amongst those who are artists and philosophers many think that the great vessel has left for a land which it is never destined to reach—and they envy the prisoners in the engine rooms and in the factories who believe they are working to a profitable end. For of all the vanities of this world the most vain is that which says that all is vanity!



*Cornmarket St  
& Tom Tower*



## IX

ON the walls of the library in this amicable Union society I have often traced the lines of a fresco faded and partly hidden too by books, which represents 'Lancelot's vision of the holy graal'. What I especially revered in this discoloured fresco was the memory of the painter whose work it is and whose name was Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Few artists of our day have possessed in a higher degree than this man a veneration of their art, and a saintly worship of sublime and divine beauty. It was in 1856 and at the age of twenty-eight that he painted this vision of the holy graal, and converted to his æsthetic faith two Oxford students of that time, of whom one was Burne-Jones, the other Algernon Charles Swinburne. The former has become the most famous painter of contemporary England. The latter has written *Poems and Ballads*, *Atalante to Calydon*, *Chastelard*, *Erechtheus*, so many master-pieces which have

made him the undisputed master of the youthful poetic school.

What talks the walls of this hall must have been witnesses to between these three ardent disciples of the ideal who were also three geniuses! But who had discovered their genius in those days, and who believed in it then? Have you ever thought that the best part of the lives of most artists is passed thus in obscurity and without witnesses. This time of youth and opening manhood, when the mind is overflowing with new ideas, when the flowers of fancy and enthusiasm open naturally, like the lilies in clear water, in that current which flows so freely; that age of candour and delight in the discovery of talent is also the age of solitude, of disdainful silence and often of animosity. In such studio or study talks the great artist scatters more new thought, more delightful *esprit*, more exquisite imagination than he will be able to do in whole months later on, just as his young face expresses more happy emotions than it will one day bear deep lines and unalterable change. And these are lost treasures; but does it not add to their poetry that they should be lost?

Already enigmatic and peculiar from

the very character of his ideal, which united in the closest manner the love of symbolism with the minute study of reality, Rossetti was unusually so by reason of his dual genius. He was indeed poet and painter of equal force, very often treating the same subject with both brush and pen. It is rare to find in harmony the love of lovely words which tends to poetry, and the conception of colour which tends to painting, and yet painters are agreed in recognizing in Rossetti's pictures qualities which belong solely to a painter, whilst the readers of his sonnets, of his poem *Lilith*, his *Blessed damozel*, his *Last confession*, could not but allow in him the gift of purely poetic beauty. It is true that his education had been so extraordinary that an exceptional result from this exceptional training should follow as a matter of course.

Rossetti was the eldest son of an Italian who, having been exiled from the kingdom of Naples after the events of 1820, took refuge in England and there became the recognized commentator of the *Divine comedy*. It is as a tribute to his admiration for this poem that the exile gave the name of Dante to his child. One can easily imagine in what an atmosphere of



mysticism this child grew, and also how greatly this mysticism was heightened when contrasted with English life, exact, healthy and powerfully positivist. Early too Rossetti began to feel that difficulty of adjusting himself to contemporary requirements which is the cruel ransom of too refined sensibility. Passionately devoted to his art and to a certain kind of complex beauty whose chimera he always followed, prey to an extreme sensitiveness which made the least criticism seem like a stroke from a dagger and with all this, impatient of contradiction and easily persuaded that his enemies plotted dark schemes against him, he lived in a circle of faithful admirers and intimate friends. He exhibited very few of his paintings in public, and it was only during the last ten years of his life that he published two volumes of his verses : the *Poems* and the *Ballads and sonnets*.

At one time he even decided that these verses should disappear for ever. After two years of married life he had just lost a young wife who had first of all been his pupil in painting and whose face realized in the most striking way the type of feminine beauty which can be traced in all his paintings. This young wife having

suffered acutely from neuralgia took to drinking laudanum and an overdose killed her. In the delirium of his grief the poet decreed that they should bury with her the collection of his poems which were still in manuscript, and which he had copied for her in a beautifully bound volume. 'I wrote those verses only for thee and they cannot remain where thou art not. . . ' he had said weeping. So he placed the book beside the face of the dead one already lying in her coffin. They nailed down the last lid and the poor woman was buried in Highgate cemetery. Rossetti himself seemed to have abandoned all hope in life. He might have said with the poet Armand Silvestre in those very touching lines :

On thy ripe lips I drank the sleep of roses,  
And in thy deep eyes the scorn of suns. . .

You will smile, my friend, and once again we shall say together that the first and last mistress of the heart of a man of letters is literature. And yet we are only half right ! . . . Rossetti came to it by degrees, it did not console him, for he only regretted his romantic decision. This entombment of all his poems, of which he had no other copy, and which

he felt himself incapable of re-writing, seemed to him like the entombment of the best part of his fame. He had been quite sincere when he had sacrificed his fame to his love. He was still sincere when he revoked this early act. Seven and a half years after the funeral, one dark night in Highgate cemetery, the workmen undertook a sad task. They exhumed the coffin of Rossetti's wife whom they saw lying in her bier, still in all the grace of her earthly beauty which embalming had preserved, and the little book was there too in its place near her thin cheek and her beautiful hair. The friend who had undertaken this sad task took back the volume. A few months later the poems were published and met with a brilliant success. But Rossetti never forgave himself for having committed what he called his sacrilege. . . . Let us not smile too much over this story, for there is in it enough to make one weep. Let us not weep, for we can smile at it too. There will ever be found in the artist something of a conceited child who blows soap bubbles with his tears to show to the passers by grouped around him all the colours of the prism—and yet these are real

tears shed from real eyes over a real grief.

There is something in the charm of poetry like the perfume of a flower, like the sound of a voice, like the expression of a look. It is indescribable and unspeakable. One must oneself look into those eyes, listen to that voice, breathe the perfume of that flower, and read those verses. Those of Rossetti written with an untiring care for the most rare and subtle beauty, in language of the highest culture, and with infinite delicacy of detail, disclose a soul wonderfully alive and passionate, at the same time a clear and precise outlining of figures which betokens the mind of the painter. Rossetti readily introduces into his poems a kind of refrain, one or two lines which reappear in each verse, and which, forming by themselves a distinct picture, serve as a basis of reverie to the rest of the poem. It is thus in one piece where Helen is described as offering to Venus a cup moulded like her breast and demanding of the goddess to love and to be loved, the following lines are repeated verse after verse, sounding as it were a tocsin of alarm : 'O Troy town ! . . . O Troy's down ! . . . Tall Troy's on

fire! . . .' and further on the fair tresses of the daughter of Leda, the altar of Aphrodite and the proffered cup, the fields of carnage rise tragically before us. Then again Rossetti chooses legendary subjects, which he interprets with an entirely modern treatment. In this way he gives speech to Lilith the first wife of the first man before the creation of Eve, that Lilith who before assuming the form of woman was a serpent: 'I was the fairest snake in Eden. . . .' Readily too his whole energy is brought to bear in imprisoning within the fourteen lines of a sonnet a thought of powerful suggestion, and he succeeds. What grand and sorrowful poetry there is in the opening lines of one of these sonnets:

'Look in my face; my name is Might-have-been;  
I am also called No-more, Too-late, Fare-  
well; . . .'

But where, to my mind, Rossetti is incomparable, is in his lyric pieces, which are short but of infinite length of thought, such as the one entitled, 'Alas, so long!' The first verse of which is so sweetly musical:

'Ah! dear one, we were young so long,  
It seemed that youth would never go,  
For skies and trees were ever in song  
And water in singing flow

In the days we never again shall know.

Alas, so long!

Ah! then was it all spring weather?

Nay, but we were young and together.'

And the second verse takes it up:

'Ah! dear one, I've been old so long..'

And the third:

'Ah! dear one, you've been dead so long!..'

Is it not she, the shrouded one of Highgate, who rises from her tomb, with her closed eyes, her dishevelled hair, her colourless face? And she comes to reclaim the pledge of undying tenderness, the book-companion of her lonely sleep. What criminal hand has dared to violate the silence where the dead reposed? . . . O beautiful phantom, now that the lover guilty of this sacrilege has gone to join thee, answer, hast thou forgiven him for having preferred the care of his own fame to the sacredness of thy grave? Or else have you both entered that kingdom where there is no place either for pardon or hate, or even sacrilege, but only for the cold motionless darkness and the annihilation which not a remembrance can penetrate—not a remembrance!

'Ah! dear one, you've been dead so long!..'

## X

Lazy laughing languid Jenny  
Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea. . .

THESE are two lines of Rossetti which form the opening of a poem of strange sweetness on an English girl. These two lines came confusedly into my mind when, after having dined between the 'Times' and a bottle of claret in a lonely room of a small hotel dating from Shakespeare's time, I was walking up and down the pavement of the High and the Corn, and met the grisettes of Oxford sauntering along in couples arm in arm. They are so true, these two lines, and interpret so well that indescribable dreamy something in the eyes and brightness in the smile, that wheedling and at the same time calculating look which predominates in these childlike faces of eighteen years. Good-hearted or coquettish, they went along, dressed in their rather short skirts, the hat tilted over the forehead, hands in black gloves, and feet in black stockings



ST MARY'S & HIGH STREET





and black shoes. The clearness of their pink complexions and the brightness of their fair hair were noticeable in the waning light. They stopped talking first with one then with another, seldom with a student, for the proctors whose business it is to look after the morals of the undergraduates may appear round the corner of the street.

But outside the members of the University is there not a semi-bourgeoise, semi-commercial population, which lives in the town, and do not these girls, who have been brought up amongst these houses, know all the young men about here with whom they have had many a pitched battle in public, just as do the younger boys and girls now-a-days? These violent outbursts at every meeting are one of the features of an English street which most shocks one of my friends brought up in France. But I as a foreigner, how could I do otherwise than love every portion of this street which I am watching as it prepares slowly for sleep?

The shops close one after another—that bookseller's where the works of the poets are for sale, is where I bought my Rossetti with its beautiful green binding starred with gold flowers; there is the

bootmaker's where they sell so-called anatomical boots, and in the window are two designs showing the bare foot comfortably fitted into a square-toed shoe, then the same foot painfully squeezed into a pointed shoe. The tailor's shop is closed too, where one may see the gowns of the bachelor and master of arts amongst Gladstone bags and travelling straps. The shutters have been put up before the photographer's window where portraits of the principal doctors of the colleges may be seen side by side with those of well-known actresses. The Ophelias, Desdemonas and Juliets must lie buried in shadow until to-morrow. The dealer in old books too is beginning to close his shop behind whose windows are posted profane pen-and-ink caricatures relating to the recent University ceremonies. The tobacconist and publican alone keep their shops and bars open. And the strollers become less numerous near the houses whose projecting windows and different style bear witness to the changing architecture of succeeding periods. No doubt behind one of these windows a student is giving a 'wine', for one hears the noise of a piano, and a chorus of voices singing the satirical ballad 'the

good young man. . .’ Shouts proceed from another window opening on the first floor of an old hotel. These are other students who are being entertained at a dinner. They are in evening dress. One after another if one may judge by the shadows outlined against the windows, they rise and propose the toasts. To judge from the noise, the dry champagne and sparkling moselle have done their work, which will not however prevent the drinkers from striking up solemnly ‘God save the Queen’ at the close of the dinner. There are few if any vehicles about. The tram passes for the last time, then a tardy bicyclist who has no doubt just arrived from London, and will be in Scotland in a few days. And there remain only a few sisters of the poet’s Jenny who laughed lazily and languidly.

‘Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea. . .’

It is not of a guinea, but of a few silver pieces that they are desirous, and in want of, these poor creatures who, when the street is almost entirely deserted, continue walking swiftly two and two along the pavements of the High and the Corn. A few of them have the senseless faces of women brutalized by continual drinking ;

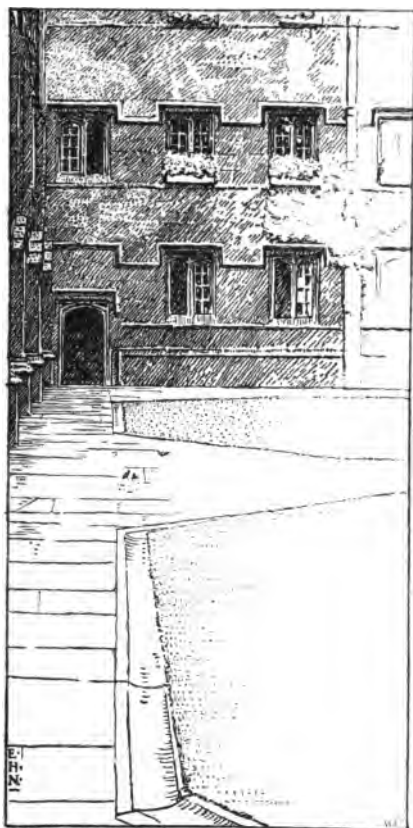
others have the youthful faces of slight delicate children with frank pretty refined features. Have I not seen plenty of these pleasure vendors wandering about Paris and London, on starlight nights, or in the fog, by moonlight or in the pelting rain? Have I not seen enough of them smiling at me with their too red lips and looking at me with their pencilled eyes? Have I not seen enough of them! And yet to-day at these encounters I experience the same indescribable feeling of sadness, and the sense of the brutality of social life is as intense as at the time when I was quite a young man convinced that goodness is the law of the world! I am well aware that many of these girls are not unhappy. I know that they end by following their vocation as a workman follows his, mechanically. Even in this little English town many are children of honest families who earn thus, unknown to their parents, something to gratify their whims. And what whims! They have small private rooms in certain bars, and through a small window the master of the establishment serves to them large glasses of brandy. . . No matter, at the sight of the most debased as well as the most pleasing one is seized with un-

conquerable pity. The tears they should shed over themselves fill the eyes of the passer-by who thinks that these women have once been pretty innocent children with beautiful clear eyes as their souls then were. Dividing this feeling of pity from the dream of redemption by love, there is hardly the thickness of a hair belonging to one of these poor girls. Such compassion as this borders so closely on foolishness ! . . . Be lazy, Jenny, be languid and be laughing ; the race of dupes is not yet near disappearing from this earth.

## XI

IT is moreover easy to talk of being duped, but does the experiencing of a feeling ever render one a dupe? And though this feeling may be the most unreasonable in the world, is one a dupe again to make it the motive of one's actions, and the right to live as one pleases? . . . Continuing my walk along the deserted street and pondering deeply over this problem which is the basis of all morality, I pass before the imposing line of buildings forming University college, and there comes back to my mind the thought of the great poet who studied in this college in his early youth, and who was expelled from it simply for obeying the sincere impulses of his heart, and expressing his religious opinions in a volume for publication.

Noble and unfortunate Shelley! All through his life he was dominated by this need of making his outer harmonize with his inner life. 'It seems to me', he wrote to Horatio Smith a month before



Shelley's rooms *University Coll:*





he died, 'that things have now arrived at such a crisis as requires every man plainly to utter his sentiments on the inefficacy of the existing religious, no less than political, systems for restraining and guiding manhood. Let us see the truth, whatever that may be . . .' And he adds with sadness 'If every man said what he thought society could not subsist a day. But all, more or less, subdue themselves to the element that surrounds them, and contribute to the evils they lament by the hypocrisy that springs from them.'

It was on account of this doctrine that Shelley, still an undergraduate at Oxford, published a writing on *The necessity of atheism* after which he was compelled to leave his college. This was in 1812. The poet was barely twenty years of age. He was destined to die ten years later, carried away by a storm after having led the most romantic and most wandering life, and as is well known, a few of his friends, amongst whom was Lord Byron, burnt his body on a lonely shore in Italy.

The perishing corporeal body was unknown  
In the happy times of Pagan art

wrote Gautier. So this great worshipper

of nature, Shelley, had the obsequies he himself would have wished, those given to a contemporary of the gentle Virgil. Chance distributes at times these posthumous kindnesses which seem like a last irony of cruel mocking nature.

The other day I visited the two rooms in this college which are said to have been those of the poet. To-day they appear like all the other rooms occupied by the Oxford students ; but in his time if one may believe the memoirs of one of his friends there was here a strange confusion of different objects scattered over the floor and on the furniture. ' There were books, boots, instruments of physical experiment, clothes, pistols, linen, crockery, bags, trunks, a solar microscope, an electric machine, and on the tables all sorts of spots from acid burns. . . ' At this time Shelley was haunted by revolutionary Utopias and by scientific curiosities. This soul impassioned of the absolute was swayed by the most imperious demands for pure idealism. For Shelley, as for Spinoza and Hegel, there existed no difference between idea and fact, between spirit and reality.

Is there not in truth a close union between thought and nature ? Is it not

one same power which, upholding both ourselves and things, manifests itself in us by reflection, outside us by forms? Could we understand even the smallest, the most fragmentary detail of this world which surrounds us, if the laws of our reason were not of the same order as those of our being? Applied to politics this conception of the identity of the ideal and the real led Shelley to revolt against established society. He clearly recognized justice, and he had no great trouble in learning that the organization of our old Europe is founded on worldly injustices. Applied to private conduct, this same conception threw him into despair. 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed! . . .' he himself wrote in his magnificent *Ode to the west wind*. On the other hand, he owed to this intensity of his idealism the supreme beauty of his poetry, a beauty so new and so enchanting, that every other art seems unpolished when compared with it, every other life calculating and petty in comparison with this life of sublime delusions and infinite sensibilities.

On the first page of a volume of Shelley's poems one might write this curious deep thought of the subtle Amliel:

‘A landscape is a state of the soul’. The highest magic of this imagination is that in truth everything is spiritualized and rendered human before it, but this spirituality is neither the result of a symbolism nor of a comparison. Shelley considers that there is between the soul and nature not an analogy but an identity. A diffused thought animates the most minute particle of this immense universe, and this thought is not different from our thought. A hidden sensibility quivers through what we call things, and this sensibility only differs from ours in degree. When we compare an emotion of the human heart with an aspect of the visible world, we only recognize the secret tie which binds, the one to the other, all the manifestations of universal life. And this vision of living sympathy which cements our being to nature is so precise, so obsessive, that involuntarily Shelley reverses the order of poetic comparisons and creates a new order of metaphors. Instead of assimilating as tradition would have it, the impressions of man with the phenomena of outward life, he assimilates these phenomena with the impressions of man, thus following the road of nature herself, for is not the entire universe dependent from

our soul, by which it completes itself and becomes conscious?

Shelley will say : ' Our boat is asleep in Serchio's stream,—Its sails are folded like thoughts in a dream' . . . He will say too, speaking of the perfume of a flower in the night, that it faints away ' like thoughts in a dream '. And this idea, that thought hidden in the heart of nature resembles our thoughts during sleep, is so familiar to him, that this word ' dream ' recurs constantly in his writings when he wishes to describe the vegetable or mineral world. He will say that the trills of the nightingale ' were mixed with the dreams of the sensitive plant.' He will call up in the silence of winter days, when ' the spring shall blow her clarion o'er the dreaming earth. . .' And speaking to the earth herself he will sigh :

' To happy earth, over thy face shall creep—the wakening vernal airs, until thou leaping—from unremembered dreams. . . '

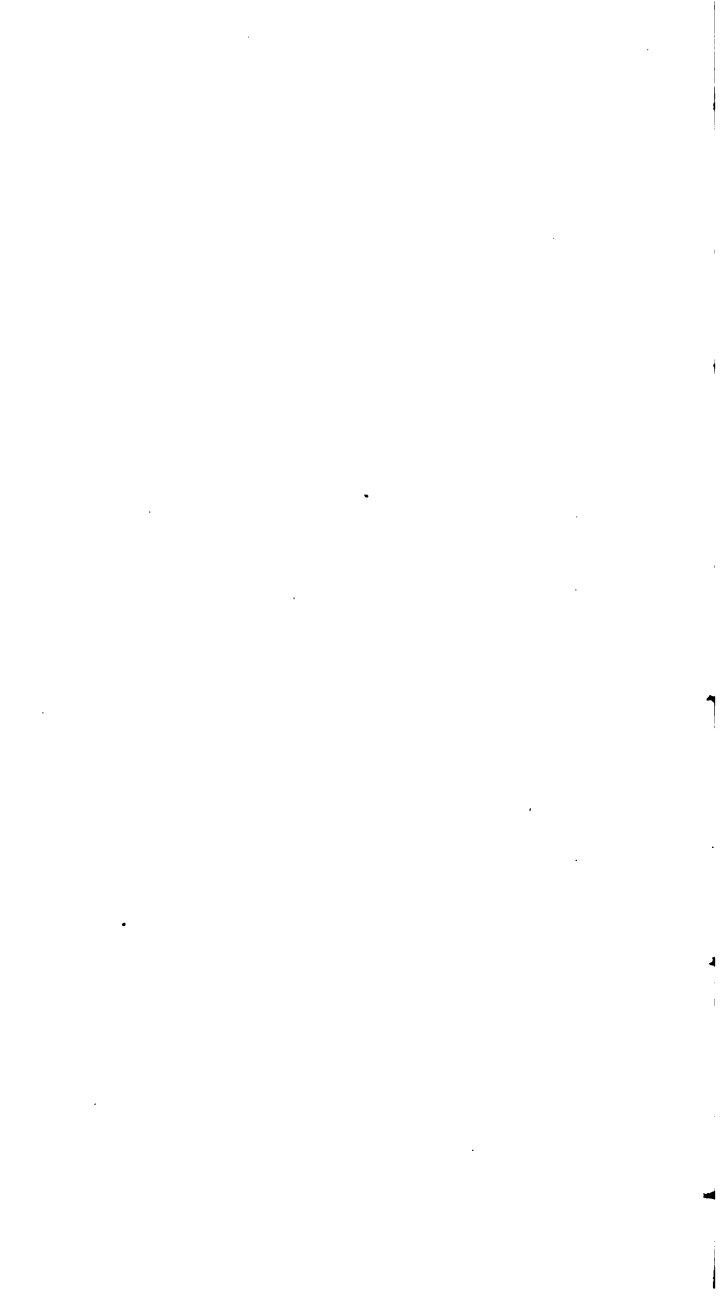
After a lengthy reading of this poetry, a curious change takes place in one's thoughts: one ceases to see men in their individual character. It is one soul which reveals itself whose ceaseless long-

ing is expressed by all beings and all things. It is the vast heart of the universe, prey to an infinite yearning which can never be satisfied. It is this sad, this mighty spirit which is supreme reality, and we ourselves are but the shadows of a dream in this life where all is semblance, 'where nothing is, but all things seem,—and we the shadows of the dream'.



*The College  
Barges*





## XII

BUT now the clerical and silent Oxford with its dreamy days and evenings is awakening and becoming animated as if touched by the wand of the magician. The annual ceremony of the commemoration is about to take place and already the quiet streets are filled with a motley crowd. It is at this time that the families of the students come to visit them and join in the university rejoicings which consist principally of a few balls given in two or three of the colleges. Along the pavements of the High and the Corn there is a continual coming and going of young girls, sisters or cousins of the undergraduates with that medley of costumes essential to every gathering of English women, and as the night falls these streets begin to light up. Crackers explode under the feet of the passers-by. Flags float from all the windows. The initials of the Queen: Victoria Regina: V. . . R. . . are outlined in chinese lanterns against

the fronts of the houses, and round the entrances to the hotels the children crowd together to catch a glimpse of young ladies in their evening dress as they get into their carriages.

Amongst the many official entertainments of this week of pleasure-seeking, two have struck me as being essentially English. These alone will serve to bring out the most prominent features of life at the University where a strong liking for athletics is combined with a love of the classics, and the worship of tradition with the greatest independence of spirit. First of all we see the procession of boats in the order obtained at the last boat-race. The Isis flows down through a landscape of meadows with soft green hills in the distance whilst behind us rise the stately towers of the old gothic town. On either bank of the river a large crowd is gathered. The college barges moored on one side are overflowing with people. All the fathers and mothers and sisters of the students—‘my people’ as they say—fill the decks of these barges, mounted on chairs or benches. Others wishing to obtain a better view have taken small boats. A band hidden under the trees of Christ Church meadows is

playing the most popular airs with a goodly blowing of brass instruments, and above this river swarming with heads, these trees, this landscape, stretches a lovely English summer sky of soft pale blue.

Everyone is anxious to obtain a first glimpse of the boats as they round the bend of the river from Iffley where they started a quarter of an hour before. . . At last the first one comes in sight, manned by its eight oarsmen and cox. Shouts welcome it. It pulls up before one of the barges where the representatives of the University are seated. The eight oarsmen rise, lift their oars in the air, shout three hurrahs, reseat themselves and pass on. Then comes the turn of the second boat, and so on till all have passed. The costumes of the rowers vary according to their colleges. The Magdalen colours are pink, Brasenose black and yellow, whilst others are blue and white. The men belonging to some of the colleges wear a cap of the same colour as their blazers. Others don a round straw hat with a multi-coloured ribbon. It is wonderful to see how the eight oarsmen keep time. This perfection speaks of long days of training with a

diet reduced to a minimum and regular discipline.

By some caprice which could only have originated with those who have been at home on the water for years, some of the crews enliven the scene by upsetting their boats just as they pass before the tribune of the authorities. The eight men and the cox plunge simultaneously into the water. The boat overbalances and shows her keel, then the heads of the nine swimmers reappear laughing up at the cheering crowd. In this way they regain their college barge—in the meantime their boat continues to float about the river whence it will be rescued when the crowd shall have scattered beyond Christ Church meadows, over which as the evening falls float the silvery tones of the chiming clocks. There is so much sanctity in the voices of these clocks. It is like a sweet tender whispering in the air after the excited cries which have burst from those watching the races. And in the darkening sky rises the crescent moon mysteriously overshadowed with a thin watery veil, a mourning moon but such soft tender mourning! . . . After ten journeys through English scenery, my eyes have never grown tired of this nature,

so vapoury and melting, where there is ever the spirit of the mist to counteract the positivism of practical life, nature in whom one can see, when coming from a display of physical strength, such moonlight as this, as tender and as uncertain as a remembrance.

This first water-fête is for the athletic. The ceremony at which I assisted the following day at the Sheldonian theatre is solely in honour of the humanist. The exterior appearance of this round building is rendered peculiar by a semi-circular line of colossal busts—kinds of stone caricatures supposed by one and another to represent the Cæsars and the Greek sages. In the interior a gallery may be seen surrounding a pit where everyone remains standing. A platform is erected at the extreme end of this.

Two tribunes similar to the pulpits in a church overhang this and will presently be used for the recitations. About eleven o'clock in the morning the pit and galleries are crowded with spectators. The platform alone is still unoccupied. There the wives of the Oxford dignitaries and their guests will take their places, whilst the chairs arranged in the front await the vice-chancellor and his assessors. Follow-

ing an old custom the students seated in the upper galleries give vent to exclamations of all sorts about the slightest incident. A lady dressed in yellow comes in and is about to ascend the platform. 'Three cheers for the lady in yellow', cries a voice, and three hurrahs succeed, issuing from a hundred throats. 'Three cheers for the deceased wife's sister. . .' cries another voice alluding to a bill presented to the House to legalise the marriage between a widower and the sister of his deceased wife. And three hurrahs are again heard. 'Three cheers for Dr. N. . .' This good doctor is an old man who sometimes keeps the papers at the Union too long, and whom the students accuse of sleeping instead of reading. He is on the platform in his professor's gown; which however will not prevent a voice, every fifteen minutes, and during the whole length of the ceremony, from shouting this exclamation: 'Doctor N. . . is asleep again. . '

Thus there is a continued roll of acclamations and jokes until the organ peels out 'God save the Queen,' and the ushers with their maces of silver divide the crowd and make a passage for the vice-chancellor in full dress and his suite.

In spite of this the shouting still continues, but now it has a definite object, and all the great people in this procession are cheered one after another, whilst from his high place of president the vice-chancellor begins his discourse in Latin. Running commentaries accompany his voice, coming from every corner of the hall, and provoking peels of laughter from the audience. One might imagine it to be a public meeting, only that a genuine cordiality seems to pervade the place. The vice-chancellor does not dream of getting angry with these interlocutors, nor do these latter wish to make themselves disagreeable to him. Is not this a national trait, this combination of fundamental respect for established authority with absolute independence of the individual in act and gesture?

The vice-chancellor's discourse is ended. Now is the time to receive foreign persons of distinction on whom the University is this year conferring the honorary degree of doctor. No doubt it was at such ceremonies as these that Molière scoffed in his fanciful entertainment of 'The malade'. The future doctors are conducted to the foot of the platform. They wear the black gown with the red silk



hood. An usher pronounces their eulogy in Latin, and concludes that the candidate should be admitted to the degree of doctor, *honoris causâ*. The vice-chancellor then pronounces a kind of *dignus est intrare* ending with an *honoris causâ* in which the whole audience joins and the new member of the University takes his seat on a bench reserved for him, whilst, if one may gain anything from the shouting which comes from the other end of the theatre: Dr N. . . is asleep again. . . But already another strong deep voice is heard; it is that of the *orateur public* who from the height of the rostrum pronounces in Latin the funeral eulogium of those members of the University who have died during the year.

No sooner has he finished than two laureates succeed him, who are in turn going to read a few pages of their prize essays. The subject of one of these essays is 'Life at the universities during the middle ages', of the other 'The maritime commerce of England'. This time the shouts are redoubled, and the voices of the laureates are often quite drowned. If Dr N. . . is asleep again, as a few of these mischievous jesters pretend, then he must be deaf. A rain of

scraps of paper falls from the gallery. This overflow of animal spirits has full play whilst other laureates declaim Greek, Latin and English verses. Finally the vice-chancellor rises, the organ again plays 'God save the Queen', the crowd disperses, watched beneath the peristyle by enormous busts whose interminable noses, irregular chins, and preposterous beards have for years looked down on the countless students and masters who have passed beneath them. Some have been illustrious, some unknown—and the busts continue smiling.

### XIII

. . . AND so the days went by, between lectures and observations, thoughts and walks. So they went by, and I wrote to you, my friend, in a somewhat haphazard way these lines just as they are. In wording them I have not pretended to draw for you a documentary picture, as they say now-a-days, of the old English university town. The charm of such a place as Oxford, where the past is so closely linked with the present, and which is so full of tradition and yet so living, is to furnish material for thought of the most varied order. Every man can find here food to nourish his own favourite ideas. A politician can study on the spot the worth of a system whose basis is to educate together young men who will one day make up the guiding force of the nation, either as clergymen or members of the lay aristocracy. One interested in architecture will find in the details of these buildings, such as the colleges and



**SHELDONIAN THEATRE**



chapels which date from very different periods, an object for unlimited study. An amateur pedagogue may verify his theories on the expediency of classical studies, and the advantages or drawbacks of an equal development of mental and physical forces.

It seems to me that outside these special analyses, it is interesting to notice what impressions affect most a Frenchman of letters, in the pervading atmosphere of this literary town, where every stone speaks of things of the mind, and the work of past generations.

Now the students have gone down, the colleges are deserted ; rarely from time to time does one meet in the streets some fellow who has not yet left for the country. Once Commemoration week is over, it is vacation until the autumn. I too am about to leave this peaceful spot, where I have passed two months in a kind of dream, thanks to the soothing influence of these old cloisters, these green gardens, these learned and delightful surroundings—from the window of my railway carriage my eyes will long rest on the old buildings and houses of Oxford—paradise of study dwelt in for so short a time ! and I shall recall those lines from

Milton's *Il Penseroso*, which one of my amiable Oxford hosts quoted so often to me: 'But let my due feet never fall—to walk the studious cloisters pale . . .' said the great puritan. Delusive wish, for I must return to busy heartless Paris. But if one did not usually live in the midst of this bustle and heartlessness could one truly appreciate the beauty of these cloisters and these gardens?

May-June, 1883

## XIV

THE month of August is beginning, and this morning I have caught the express train which is to take me to Oxford to lunch and bring me back to London this evening. I find it, this town of Oxford, exactly as I left it just a year ago. This is the time when the students desert the old University, at least those who do not intend to prolong their year's work by following further learned lectures. Those of the tutors whose sole business in life is teaching are travelling too. But the student and the fellow—there is no equivalent in French to express this essentially English title—who wish to work have remained here. They are the sole masters of the deserted colleges. To them belong without fear of intruders the paths of the old gardens overshadowed by venerable trees, theirs are the gothic cloisters where in thought one may become the contemporary of Duns Scotus, theirs too the libraries, whose small wooden

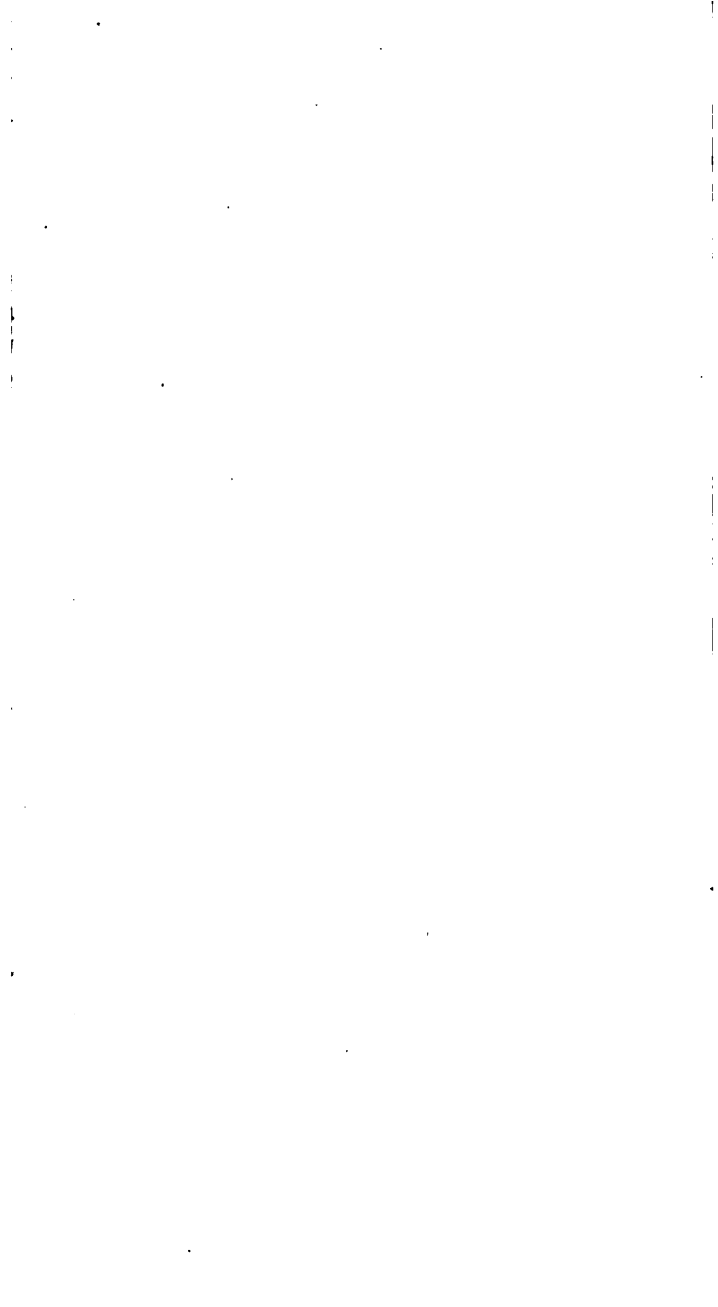


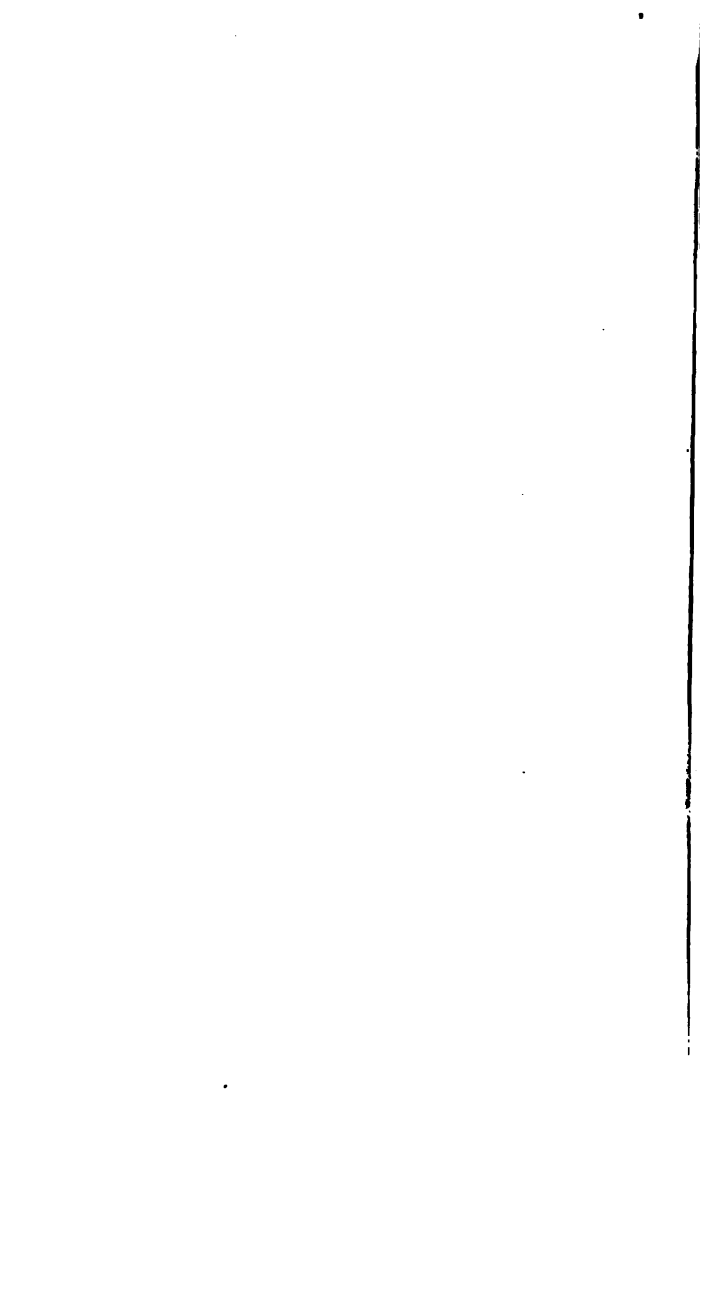
studies lined with books and ending in a pointed window, form a retreat exactly suited to a doctor Faustus in the act of calling up the shade of Helen. Theirs is the right of carrying on long conversations in the evening in some lonely room whilst the decanters of port and sherry are slowly emptied. Often in the afternoon the young student goes on the river, now given over to the solitude of nature. He takes a boat and rows as far as some shady nook. He moors his boat to the trunk of a tree. Then lying flat, the short briar pipe in his mouth, he remains here reading until the cool of the evening. Not a sound is heard but the whispering of the breeze through the willow leaves. The landscape is quite uniform, everywhere green, a gentle incline rises on the left, and on the right are outlined the towers and spires. The student is studying deeply some learned work from Germany, on the versification of Pindar. From time to time he pauses in his reading to think of the pleasure that will be his next year when he will carry off the prize for Greek poetry. On an eventful day during the rejoicings of the University, he will himself declaim his verses in the Sheldonian theatre, from the height of

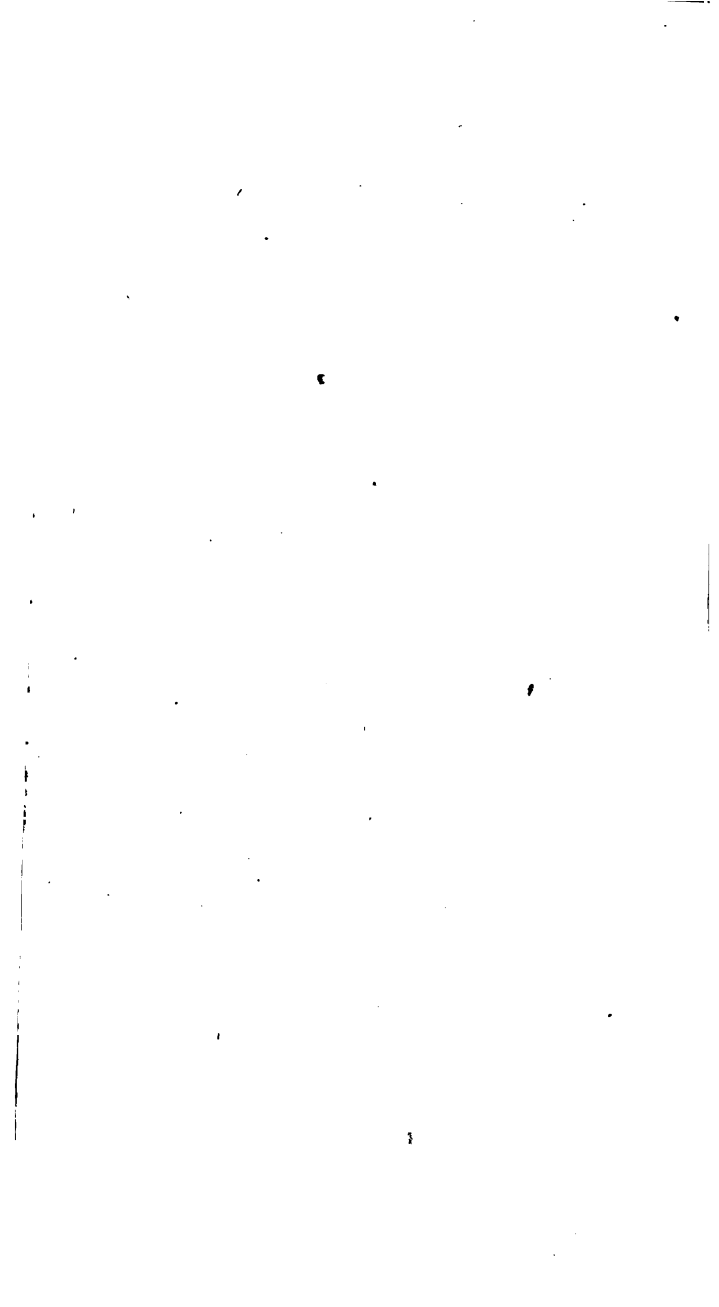
the rostrum, and his fiancée will be there to hear him! . . . The fellow advanced in years—he will be sixty next winter—is far too dignified to trust his worthy person in a canoe. He is alone this afternoon in the study, which has been his for more than thirty years, in the heart of his college. The bow-window juts out over a green lawn, and the fellow is smoking a briar pipe too, as he looks through a correspondence bearing on his quarrel with one of the most celebrated professors of Tübingen concerning a text of Ausonius. The young student and the old man are both content, and without any care for the things of this world. The college which they live in existed one hundred years ago, four hundred years ago, six hundred years ago. Thrones may fall, men may die, but ancient Oxford can never fall—this Oxford which Dante might have visited. . . . Voices are heard in the garden, the fellow looks up from his reading to see through the lead-encircled panes who is venturing into his college. He notices a group of visitors, both men and women, strangers of high standing in the world if one may judge from their appearance; amongst them is a young woman, elegant and attractive.

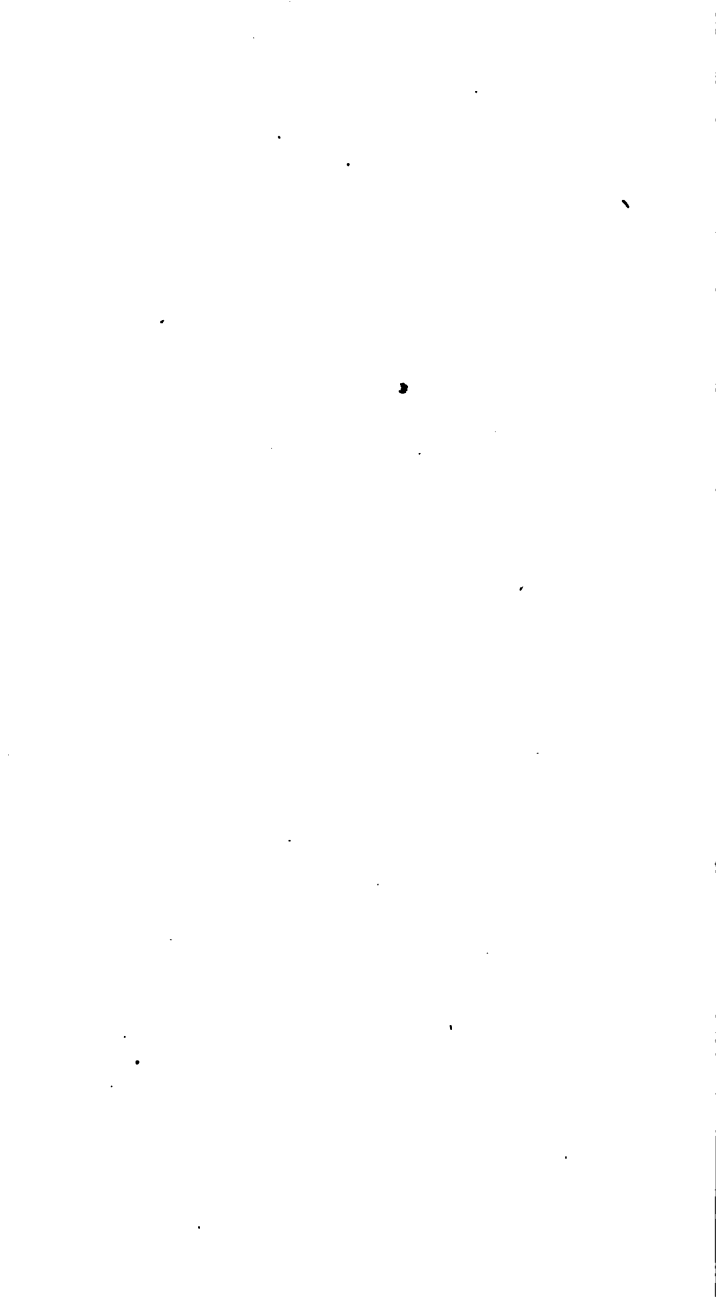
**Who knows? Perhaps these visitors are searching for the blue bird which is called happiness—but the fellow knows that the blue bird builds his nest in the niches of old cloisters, and once more he takes up his papers with delight. Happy man whom chance has allowed to mould his life to the only happiness which does not deceive:—habit!**

**August, 1884**









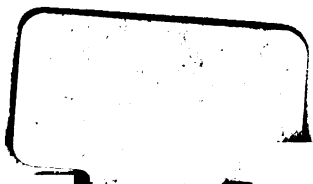
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